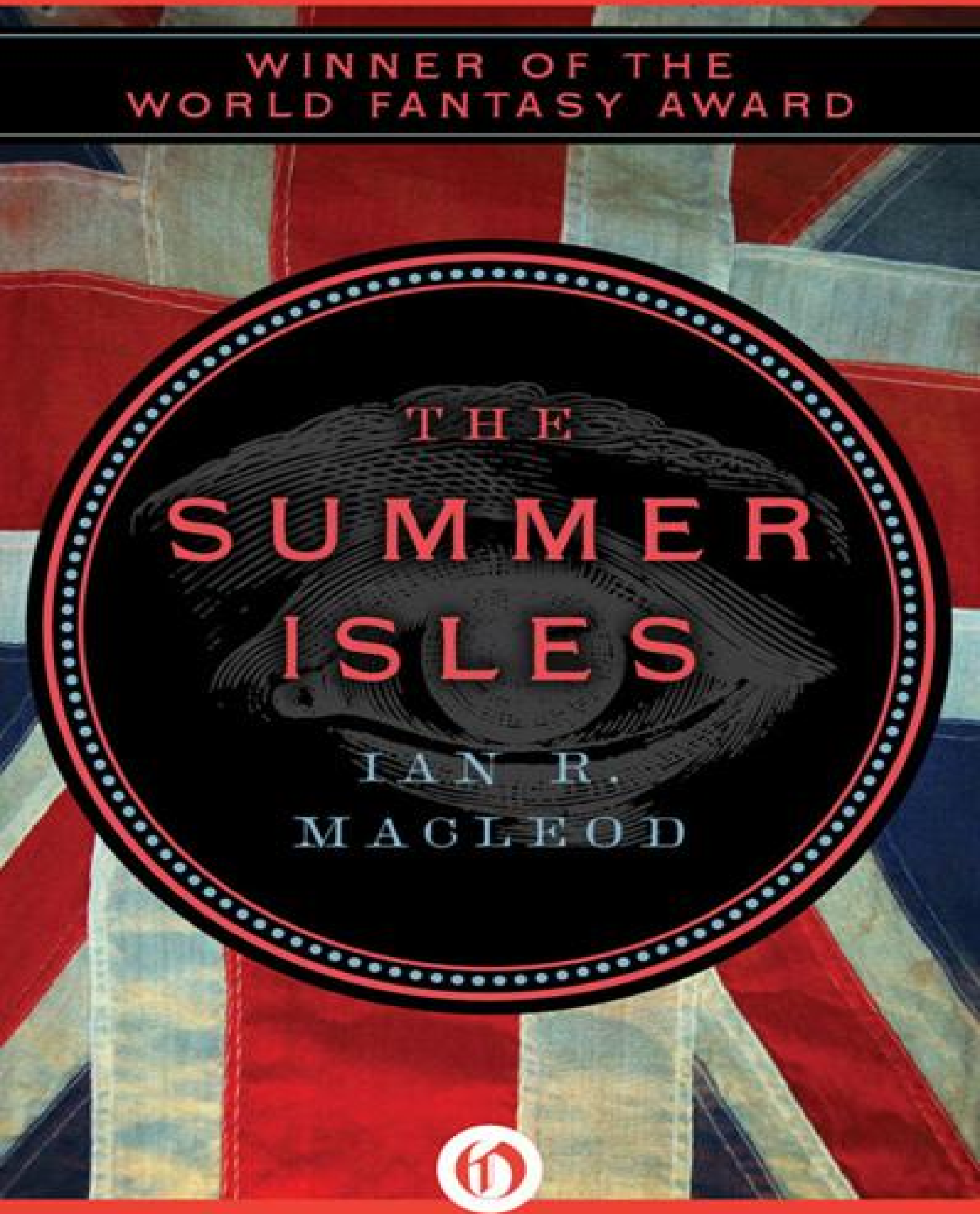
WINNER OF THE WORLD FANTASY AWARD



THE SUMMER ISLES

IAN R. MACLEOD

PRAISE FOR THE WRITING OF IAN R. MacLEOD

The Light Ages

“A meditative portrayal of an exotic society, fascinating in its unhealthy languor and seemingly imperturbable stasis … so powerfully recalls Dickens’s [*Great Expectations*] that this affinity animates the entire work.” —*The Washington Post Book World*

“MacLeod brings a Dickensian life to the pounding factories of London in a style he calls ‘realistic fantasy.’ It’s a complete world brought to life with compassionate characters and lyrical writing.” —*The Denver Post*

“Stands beside the achievements of China Miéville. A must-read.” —Jeff VanderMeer

“An outstanding smoke-and-sorcery saga to rival Philip Pullman’s Dark Materials trilogy and China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station*.” —Michael Moorcock

The House of Storms

“Ian MacLeod writes like an angel. He strings together ideally chosen words into sentences that are variously lush, sparse, subtle, bold, joyous, mournful, comic, or tragic … But it’s on the character front that MacLeod truly expends his best efforts and achieves the most.” —SF Signal

“One of the finest prose stylists around, and—borrowing as he does much of the melodrama of Victorian literature, along with the revisionist modernism of later authors like D. H. Lawrence—his writing is unfailingly elegant.” —*Locus*

The Summer Isles

Winner of the World Fantasy Award and the Sidewise Award for Alternate History

“Projecting Nazi Germany onto the England of the [thirties] is a most effective counterfactual device; and in the opposition of the narrator,

historian Geoffrey Brook, and Britain's Fuehrer, John Arthur, MacLeod sums up very neatly the division in the British psyche at the time, between Churchillian grit and abject appeasement." —*Locus*

The Great Wheel
Winner of the Locus Award for Best First Novel

"A serious, thoughtful work of futuristic fiction, this haunting novel is a bridge between Huxley's *Brave New World* and Frank Herbert's *Dune*." —*Publishers Weekly*

Song of Time
Winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award

"Confirms MacLeod as one of the country's very best literary SF writers." —*The Guardian*

Wake Up and Dream

"Set in an anti-Semitic U.S. drifting towards collusion with Nazi Germany, *Wake Up and Dream* slowly picks at the artifice of Hollywood to reveal its morally rotten core." —*The Guardian*

The Summer Isles

Ian R. MacLeod

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A Biography of Ian R. MacLeod

Isles Lost, Isles Found

by Ian R. MacLeod

EVERY NOVEL CONTAINS AT least three stories. Of course, there's story in its pages. But then there's the story of its writing. And there's also the story of its reaching, or not reaching, the bigger world of its readers. As these things go, *The Summer Isles* proved a remarkably easy novel to write. But then it hit a wall which only now, through the book you hold in your hand, it's finally managing to break through. At the time, I was puzzled and hurt. It is, I still think, my most rounded and complete work, and deals with an important, if not vital, subject. The success of the novella, which I created from the book at Gardner Dozois's kind suggestion, only added to my confusion.

I don't have any explanations to offer about the strange progress of this book. Novels aren't about certainties, and introductions to them even less so, and writers must learn to exist in lands of confusion. Alternate history, by any standards an honorable strand in speculative fiction, has often been said to be in the doldrums by people who claim to know such things. There's this book's very Englishness. There are the sexual leanings of its main character. Then there's its politics. But I firmly believe (as I writer, I think I have to) that that which is worthwhile will eventually rise to the surface. And here they are; these risen pages.

The Summer Isles explores the undeniable fact that we humans are pack animals. That, most of the time, we keep in with the crowd and do what seems to be expected of us. This process—our ability to enter the mind-set and attitudes of the culture we find ourselves in—is vital to our survival as a species. After all, if every decision and precept were continually challenged, life and society would soon grind to a halt. We live and comply each day with innumerable petty demands, hierarchies and regulations. In any other direction lies chaos and madness. But this instinct to comply runs far deeper than our willingness to pay parking good, and what we think of as evil.

Sometimes, an entire society can become so skewed in the standards it sets itself that to find an understanding of the things which are done in its

name can seem, in retrospect, barely possible. But the instances in history of such events happening are worryingly many. There's the Terror during the French Revolution. There's the mechanised slaughter in the trenches during World War One. There's Nazi Germany.

When I set out to write *The Summer Isles*, I wasn't so specifically concerned to mirror any particular episode of what might be called social madness as to make a general exploration of it. The necessary choice of a time and place, however, dictated that some parallels were more obvious than others. If England had suffered what Germany suffered in the 1920s and 30s, it seemed to me not so much plausible as inevitable that the so-called certainties which we English still merrily cling to would drift and darken towards some form of fascism.

But the politics was incidental. Fascism, when you attempt to analyse it, is a will-of-a-wisp of meaningless prejudices and hopeless aspirations in any case. What I really wanted to show was that, like the participants in Milgram's famous experiment, people will mostly do what they are told, even when the things they are told to do, or witness, or conspire in or turn their backs from, are terrible. And I wanted to show how ordinary our compliance would feel—and then, being an Englishman, just how English.

Prejudice exists. People condemn and dislike and persecute. You see it in the news. You encounter it when to talk to otherwise charming people at parties. You'll also find it in your own heart, if you're prepared to look deeply enough. So much of what happens in *The Summer Isles*, and many of the things which are said by its characters, is simply a reportage and reflection not of some oddly twisted alternative universe, but of the way things really are.

You scarcely have to look far in this current world of ours to see similar horrors and stupidities. It seems to me that deep certainty, especially moral certainty, whether it is bolstered by religion or some political philosophy, is the best breeding ground for this kind of social madness. It exists, plainly, in the minds of many terrorists and so-called freedom fighters, but it still also exists amid nations. The terminology is irrelevant. Fascism sticks out to us now only because it is currently seen as laughably outdated. Terrible things have been done in the name of such nebulous concepts as *the will of the people*, or of God, and in the name of science, and of freedom, and even of democracy.

History, even alternate history, has never yet stopped repeating itself. Let's just hope, now, that it's time for a change.

Bewdley, England
December 2004

PART ONE

1

ON THIS AS ON almost every Sunday evening, I find a message from my acquaintance on the wall of the third cubicle of the Gents beside Christ Church Meadow. For a while we experimented with chalk, but everything is cleaned so regularly these days that it was often erased. So we make do with a thumbnail dug discreetly into the soft surface of the paint.

This whole place has become so bright and neat that it's hardly like a proper Gents at all. Toilet rolls on all the holders, clean basins, polished wooden seats, and a one-armed War veteran who sits reading *John Bull* and smoking Capstan Full Strength in his glass cubicle. But he's gone now. It's past eight. The plangent sound of evensong bells carries through the tiny frosted window.

I do the obvious thing one does in a toilet—delaying the moment of looking like a child with a last precious sweet—and then I study the mark. It's two thumbnails this week, which means the abandoned shed by the allotments past the rugby grounds in an hour's time. I mark it with my own nail so that we'll both know it's been seen. A trail of other such marks run across the cubicle wall; what amounts nowadays to my entire sexual life. I see here that week in February when I was suffering from the influenza that still seems to trouble me, and tottered from what felt like my death bed to make the cross-nail sign that would inform my acquaintance that there was nothing doing. (I could have left no mark at all and simply not turned up, but we deviants are still human. That would have worried and inconvenienced him.) And here—Oh, happy, dangerous days!—is the special triple-mark that meant a back room in the hotel of a sympathetic but understandably wary proprietor. Good old Larry Black at the Crown and Cushion. He's gone now, of course, has Larry. Quietly taken one night for the shocks and needles of the treatment centres around Ramsey and Onchan on the Isle of Man. So many have gone now that it sometimes seems that the rest of us are ghosts, going silently and unseen about these last fragments of our rituals.

The paint, like everything else in this country that once used to be so shoddy and municipal, is fresh, scarcely a year old and soaped-down twice

weekly. A single erect penis raises its lonely head as I look hard for graffiti, and there are a few swastikas from that little man in Germany. Still, and almost lost from sight in the shadow of the cistern, an offer is made of intimate services at a specified time and date. I can't help but smile at that. Could anyone be so naive? More probably, it was done as a half-sad joke, much like the fact that I and my acquaintance still use this place for our own discreet messages; a tiny monument to other, freer, times. Although, I reflect as I pull the chain, they hardly seemed free whilst one was living them.

I clunk back the lock and step out into the sweetly disinfected Jeyes Fluid air. I wash my hands, studiously ignoring the young man who stands at the stalls, humming to himself as he urinates splashingly. Above him on the wall, with what, if you didn't know this country, you would surely imagine to be ironic intent, hangs a photograph of John Arthur. He gazes warmly across his desk, looking younger than his forty-nine years despite his grey hair. A file lies open before him. A pen waits in his hand. Papers to process. Lives to change. The photograph is brass-framed, well-polished. It could fit in the best drawing rooms in the land. Of course, no one has dared to deface it. I straighten my tie and the lapels of my jacket as my reflection lies over his on the glass, and smile warmly back at him.

To pass the required hour whilst early summer darkness thickens, I return up St Giles to the Eagle and Child. There, I drink Burton's beer and tamp in a moist pipe-full of Four Square Ready-Rubbed beside a pleasant but unseasonable inglenook fire. From beyond a leaning doorway drift the strangulated cries of upper-class voices. There are a few genuine academics still left at Oxford, although Williams has gone, Lewis contents himself with the income he makes from children's books, and it's said that Tolkien soon hopes to do the same. But, still, the insults fly about *Beowulf* and *The Cloud of Unknowing.* Sham that I am, I content myself with studying the pages of today's *New Cross* which, because of its Modernist leanings, has a freer hand than the supposedly more intellectual papers.

The front page is filled with the text of John Arthur's Victory Anniversary speech to the cheeringly patriotic crowds in Sackville Street, Dublin, and with speculation about the as-yet-to-be-announced celebrations for Trafalgar Day this autumn, which is also his fiftieth birthday. It, and a photograph of the man not dissimilar to the one in Christ Church Gents,

barely detain me. I flick instead past *Modernist Tips For Mr. and Mrs. Newly-Married* and photos of the Hyde Park Jamboree towards the central pages and the *Cross's* leader column, which often has an almost supernatural prescience. Look at the way the Government responded to its pleas for compulsory identity cards. Look at the timely suicide, in his cell, of De Valera…For a while as the Latin and Middle English put-downs from the dons in the room beyond become more convoluted, I can't help feeling that I'm the true historian here. That, just as the *Cross's* masthead promises, the clumsy phrases I'm reading will be the stuff out of which the future will be made.

Today, though, the leader is nothing more than a general rant against the French and their expansionist tendencies in the Middle East. Recently, there have also been threats and arguments with them about the security of the Channel Isles, and the ownership of the land Britain has regained in East Africa, but, all in all, the whole thing has an unconvincing air. The French are foreign in a way that the Irish or the rebellious Indians and Boers never will be, and thus are much harder to hate. It's still difficult to imagine that we could ever go to war against them.

I tap out my pipe on the edge of the grate, and ponder and then decline —my bladder being the perverse creature it is—the prospect of a second pint of Burton's. Still, I feel light-headed as I stand up. Ghost whispers fill my head, and my hand trembles noticeably as I bear my empty glass towards the bar.

Outside along St Giles, twilight has descended, yet the warmth of this early summer day remains. Bicycles whiz by. Bats flit around the street lamps. A few of the newer or expensively refurbished pubs already boom with patriotic songs. A convoy of trucks lumbers around the cobbles, filled with bewildered-looking conscripts on their way to the sprawling camps in the southeast of England.

I pause to relight my pipe as I pass St John's, fumbling through several matches, then drawing in one sweet puff before something foul catches in my throat. I lean spluttering against a wall and cough up out a surprising quantity of stringy phlegm onto the pavement, watched over by a small but disapproving gargoyle. Odd, disgusting habit—hawking and spitting. Something that, until recently, I'd only associated with old men.

There's still some life out on the playing fields. Undergrads are wandering. There are groups. Couples. Limbs entwine. Soft laughter flowers. The occasional cigarette flares. Glancing back at the towers of this city laid in shadows of hazy gold against the last flush of the sun, it's all so impossibly beautiful. It looks, in fact, exactly like an Empire Alliance poster. GREATER BRITAIN AWAKE! I smile at the thought, and wonder for a moment if there isn't some trace of reality still left in the strange dream that we in this country now seem to be living. Turning, sliding my hand into my pocket to nurse the encouraging firmness of my anticipatory erection, I cross the bridge over the Cherwell as Old Tom begins his long nightly chime.

Despite all the back-to-nature and eat-your-own-greens propaganda, the shed at the far end of the allotments and the plots it once served remains abandoned, cupped as it is in a secret hollow, lost by the men who went to the War and never came back again. Tangled with nettles and high grass, rich with sap and cuckoo spit, the whole place has a satisfyingly disreputable air. It would make an ideal haunt for a boyhood gang. But there are no brown-skinned savages here, no secret rituals—none, anyway, other than those that I and my acquaintance perform. Delinquency per se is out of fashion: although far stranger ceremonies than ours, it seems to me, have been shamelessly enacted at Carfax in broad daylight and outside New Buckingham Palace.

I lever open the shed door and duck inside. As always, the dim smell reminds me of my father's old shed. Tools and seeds and sweet dry manure. But no sign yet of my acquaintance as the floorboards creak beneath my feet and I risk striking a brief match to confirm that all is well. Unchanged. That potting bench in the shadows. The dangling webs of long-dead spiders.

The match stings my fingers and hisses out. I wait. The darkness, even as my eyes grow accustomed to the gloom, becomes near-absolute as night settles outside. The Christ Church bells have long since stopped chiming. Only some more distant tower ripples a muffled shipwreck clang. The late train to London rattles by in the distance, dead on time. The last grasshopper gives a final trill.

My acquaintance is late. In fact, he should have been here first. As I pushed back the door, his younger arms should already have been around me. The first anticipatory explorations of flesh against flesh. He trembles

often as not when we first lock together, does my acquaintance. After all, he has so much more to lose.

Despite the darkness and the secrecy with which we pretend to cloak our meetings, I know exactly who my acquaintance is. I have followed him home. I have studied the lights of his house shining through the privet that he trims so neatly each fortnight, and I have watched the welcoming faces of his wife and two daughters as they wait at the door.

Checking, occasionally, the radium glow of my watch, I let a whole hour slide by as the residue of early hope and fear sour into disappointment, and then frank anxiety. But what, after all, do I know of the demands of being a father, a husband? Of working in some grim dead-end section of the Censor's Department of the city Post Office?

At ten, I lever the shed door open and step out into the summer night, leaving my long-forgotten libido far behind me. The stars shine down implacably through the rugby Hs as I make my way back past lovers and drunks and dog walkers into the old alleys. I turn for a moment as I hear the whisper of footsteps. Could that be a figure, outlined against the mist of light that seeps from a doorway? Could it be my acquaintance? But by the time I've blinked, it becomes nothing—an aging man's fancy: the paranoias of love and fear.

Then quickly along Holywell where an owl calls, and onwards under the plane trees to my college and my quad, to the cool waiting sheets of my room deep in the serene heart of this ancient city.

I open my eyes next morning to the sight of my scout Christlow bearing a tray containing a steaming pot of Assam, a rack of toast, my own special jar of Cooper's Oxford Marmalade. Even as the disappointments of the previous evening and the cold aches that have suddenly started to assail my body wash over me, I still have to smile to find myself here.

"Lovely morning, sir."

Christlow drifts through diamonds of sunlight to place the tray astride my lap. The circled cross of the EA badge on his lapel winks knowingly at me. It's bronze and red enamel, and I'm sure it's grown larger recently. I'm unclear, though, what that signifies. A change in style, or has Christlow risen to some yet more elevated position within the ranks of the Oxford and Aylesbury District Branch of the Empire Alliance? I sip my tea and smile at

him as he purses his fat lips and prepares to say whatever it is he's planning to say to me this morning.

"Oh, by the way, sir. You asked me to remind you of your appointment today."

"Appointment?"

"I have it down on the board, sir. In the office. Just the way you told me to. At ten o-clock, you were seeing your doctor. Unless, of course, you've—"

"—No. Yes." I nod in my pyjamas, a dribble of spilt tea warming my chin—all in all, a good approximation of an absent-minded professor. "Thank you, Christlow, for reminding me."

In that scarily deferential way of his, Christlow almost bows, then retreats and closes the door. With a sound like distant thunder, his trolley trundles off down the oak-floored corridor. And yes, I truly had forgotten my appointment. The dust-spangled sunlight that threads my room now seems paler. Once more, the whispers come into my head. I am touched by the cold hands of ghosts. Memories of hopes unfulfilled, the sweet aches of love in empty sheds, and voices, loves, lives, the brush of stubbled lips which tremble at first with lust and fear, and still tremble in the sated moments afterwards as they murmur of school nativities, trips to buy paraffin heaters, the burnt roasts of Sunday lunches… They all come back to haunt me.

Walking along High an hour later filled with an odd feeling of destiny, I have to squeeze my way through the queue outside the Regal for the day's first showing of Olivier's *Henry V.* Many, like Christlow, wear EA badges. But all ages, all types, both sexes, every age and disability, are gathered. A mixture, most bizarrely of all, of town and gown—undergrads and workers—the two quite separate existences that Oxford so grudgingly contains. Can it just be that the film is as good as everyone says it is? Or is it that the more entertaining stuff from Hollywood is so strictly licensed that people will watch anything these days?

Beyond the junction of Alfred Street I push through the little door beside the jewellers and climb the stairs to the surgery. The receptionist looks up without smiling, then returns to stabbing a finger at her typewriter. The posters in this poky waiting room are like the ones you see everywhere.

WITH YOUR HELP WE CAN WIN. NOW IS THE TIME. JOIN THE EMPIRE ALLIANCE—BE A PART OF THE MODERNIST REVOLUTION. And there's a fetching painting of the towers and spires of this great dreaming city aglow at sunset, much as I saw them yesterday. THIS SCEPTRED ISLE. When, I wonder, has the Bard been so popular?

"Mr. Brook. Doctor Parker will see you."

"Doctor *Parker*?"

But the receptionist's eyes are averted as she searches the typewriter for another letter. I push through the doorway, blinking. Doctor Parker is totally new to me. He looks, in fact, almost totally new to himself. Fresh-faced, young and pinkly bald, he stares through me as I slump down opposite his desk in a creaky wicker chair. Our discussion revolves at first around who I am, and then which doctor I had seen when I was last here, which was a Doctor Cole, as I recall, who was as old and brown as this man is pink and young.

I have no one but myself to blame for taking my chances with the National Health Service. I could have availed myself of Doctor Reichard, who comes to our college every Wednesday to see to us dons, and is available at most other times, since, on the basis of a stipend granted by George I in 1715, these attendances comprise his sole professional duty. But my complaints—shortness of breath, the cough, the odd whispering that sometimes comes upon me, the growing ache in my bones—sound all too much like the simple ravages of age. And I nurse, also, a superstitious fear that my sexual leanings will be apparent to the trained medical eye.

"Sorry about this ah… I've only just got…" he says as he rummages in the files around his desk, his face pursed in what looks like prissy disgust. "You're the ah…The columnist, aren't you?"

"I was," I say, giving my customary shrug to indicate the time that has passed—it's been eight years now—since I and the *Daily Sketch* finally parted company.

"What was it?" He pauses, faint dust rising around him. "*The Fingers Of History?*"

"*Figures of History*."

"Of course. Used to find it handy at school. You know, *Life Of Cromwell.* Cut up what you'd written into pieces, then stick it back together again. Metaphorically, of course. And my main interest was always

science.” A pause as a waxy sheaf of what I suspect are my X-rays clatter to the floor. Then another thought strikes him. “And you knew him, didn’t you? I mean, you knew John Arthur…”

“That was a long time ago.”

“But what’s he *really* like?”

I open my mouth to give my usual non-committal reply just as Doctor Parker stoops beneath the desk to collect the crackly brown sheets that have fallen there. It doesn’t seem worth it.

“Here we are.” He shuffles the X-rays back into order, then leans over the file. “Um—*Griffin Brooke*. I thought it was Geoffrey, and Brook without the *e*?”

“It’s a sort of pen-name,” I say, although in fact the *Oxford Calendar*, the door to my rooms—even the name tags Christlow sews into my gowns—also read Geoffrey Brook. Griffin Brooke, the name with which I was born, now resides only in odd corners such as this, where, despite the potential for confusion, I find myself reluctant to give it up. It’s still nice, sometimes, to hear someone say the name I was born with, even down to that extra *e*. It reminds me that I was once loved, and of the person I then was.

As my thoughts drift towards all the odd accidents in life that have brought me here—and how, indeed, *Fingers Of History* would be a good description of some historical process or other—another part of me watches Doctor Parker as he withdraws his elbows from my file and then raises the cover a few inches to peer sideways into it as if he’s lifting rocks in search of a particularly nasty species of crab.

Something changes behind his eyes. But when he clears his throat and smoothes back down the papers and finally makes the effort to meet my gaze, I’m still certain that I’m fully prepared for the worst. What could be more terrible, after all, than growing old, or emphysema, bronchitis, tuberculosis…?

“It seems,” he begins, “that a tumour has been growing in your lungs…”

2

THE NEXT WEEK PASSES in an oddly euphoric daze. I feel, for a start, so much better now that I know what's wrong with me. My body even seems to have stopped pestering me with unpleasant signals; it's as if it understands it can leave me alone now the medical profession has taken over. After all the delays and worries, a real sense of purpose arrives with becoming a proper patient with a proper, diagnosed illness. Even the inexplicable absence of my acquaintance from our shed somehow seems part of this same coolly logical process.

Thrust upon the gleaming linoleum rivers of the new NHS, I am kept so busy that at first that there is little time left for worry about anything else. There are further X-rays at the Radcliffe, thin screens behind which I must robe and disrobe for the benefit of cold-fingered but sympathetic men who wear half moon glasses. Nurses provide me with over-sweet tea and McVitie's Digestives from their ward tins. Porters lend me their newspapers and seek my opinion about Arsenal's chances in the FA Cup. There's comradeship, too, amongst the people with whom I must share these long waits in corridors and in campfire circles set around smoky ill-proportioned rooms. Gas fitters with piles from down the road at Abingdon and lobster-handed women from Jericho who still take in washing despite their dickey hearts—people I would normally have been at a loss to say anything to—become colleagues in this new world. My being from the University doesn't bother them. Illness is timeless, classless. Here, at the gates of pain and uncertainty, there's no town and gown. *That's nice, so does that mean you're a proper Professor? My son Nobby, now, he went on the trams…* Between tutorials and sleep and eating at Hall, my life is taken up in waits and bus journeys and having my throat and chest examined, my blood, my stools, my mucus and my urine collected in vials. Now that I am truly ill, my old fear of all things medical is easily conquered.

In fact, I feel almost heroic. After all, do not the ill have a special window of understanding on the world? And I am grateful for the impetus that my condition gives to a long-planned project of mine. A book, not of history, but *about* history. One which examines, much as a scientist might

examine the growth of a culture, the way that events unfold, and attempts to grapple with the forces that drive them. *The Fingers Of History?* The way that inspiration sometimes arrives when you're least looking for it, I may even have stumbled upon a title; serious and relevant to the subject, yet punning at the same time on my own small moment of popular fame at page eight, bottom middle column, of Saturday's *Daily Sketch* between 1928 and 1932.

After years of doubt and uncertainty, of grappling with that sense of being an impostor which has pervaded most of my life, I suddenly find that I am making good progress in writing the pivotal chapter about Napoleon. Was he a maker of history, or was he its servant? Of course, he was both—and yet it is often the little incidents, when history is approached from this angle, which stand large. Questions such as, what would have happened if his parents Carlo and Letizia had never met?—which normal historians would discount as ridiculous—suddenly become a way of casting new light. Would history have changed, or would someone else have risen in his place; a similarly great thinker, soldier and organiser who would also have underestimated the strength of British naval power and the savagery of the Russian winter? But the whole idea of a Napoleon with a different name, a different accent—taller and without Josephine—it's like Charles Lawton playing a role meant for David Niven…

From Marlborough to Louis XIV, from Charlemagne to Attila, history is full of these figures. Yet it seems to me that their influence becomes stronger as history develops. Alexander the Great remains more a creature of myth, and he came from a tradition of military might at a time when Macedonia would have had to face the hostility of neighbouring Thrace and Thessaly. The time was ripe for a strong, expansionist leader, and we must not forget that it was Alexander's father who originally planned the invasion of the Persian Empire. Strange though it may seem, it is possible to argue—I think, convincingly—that if Alexander hadn't existed, someone like him would have risen to take his place.

A similar pattern exits, I believe, throughout much of history. Columbus was just one of several mariners who were seeking the backing of the Court of Spain for a trip westward towards the Indies. Pizarro's extraordinary victories against the Incas can be explained more easily in terms of military technology than his own egotistical Christian certainties.

Henry VIII was not the first monarch to fall out with the Pope, but other forces engendered his decision to split from Rome with more far-reaching repercussions. Even Cromwell arose from a group of men like him in attitude, single-mindedness and intelligence. Until he became remarkable, no one had noticed him.

Of course, the question of the role of the individual versus the economic, social and scientific developments of human history has always been in the balance. The core argument of my book will be that this balance has slowly shifted, and that, with the final tilt of the fulcrum taking place with Napoleon, then shifting still more with the likes of Bismarck, Lincoln, Mussolini, Lenin; and even—although I know I will need to be careful here—with John Arthur, the dominant individual is now the most important force shaping history.

Working on one or two outstanding points about the Egyptian Campaign after a satisfying morning tutorial with one of this year's better undergrads, I feel that my life in Oxford is at last fitting into place. This, I imagine as my pen dances across the page, is how Gibbon must have felt. Sometimes, and not as is usually the case because I have simply run out of arguments and ideas, but rather because two or three of the things are clamouring for my attention, I even have to get up and pace the floor.

I watch myself then, finally the legitimate scholar striding about his creaky Oxford rooms. Yes, this truly is the place I once dreamed of when I knew that such a thing would be impossible. The tiled fireplace is set beneath a dimly-seen picture of a long-demolished country house in Warwickshire this college once owned. Two but-toned-leather armchairs face each other across a faded Persian rug; they are so scratched and smoothed by ages of scholarly bodies that they always seems to be in private debate. The roof beams are low. In places—for I am reasonably tall—I have to stoop to avoid them. A small iron hook juts from one, and there is a story that a student hanged himself from it after being informed that he would only ever be average at Logic. The student is unnamed—after all, suicide is just another part of the academic tradition here—but he must have been very determined, and quite short. His tale remains almost as famous as that of the don of another college who, when being told that one of his pupils had committed suicide, interrupted the bearer of the news by saying, "No, don't tell me *who.* Let me guess…"

Along with this study-cum-parlour, my college rooms consist of the bedroom in which Christlow greets me each morning, once a separate chamber, its undulating floor linked by a relatively new Eighteenth Century doorway. There is also a small gas stove and sink that hide around a curtained corner, and an even smaller room containing the toilet which smells sweetly of ancient misdirected piss. In these rooms, none of the furniture is mine, and most of the books on the sagging shelves were here when I first arrived; left as worthless by the previous incumbent although I —superstitious, respectful, lazy—have never been able to dispose of them.

If I wanted to, I could wear nothing but college gowns. Probably, if I asked Christlow, he could supply me with college underwear. My food is also provided; breakfast is brought up on a tray, lunch and collation are a sumptuous cold table in the West Room, dinner is served at eight amid the Victorian tapestries of the Hall. Tea and biscuits may be called for at all reasonable times by pulling a lever on the wall beside the fireplace. Decent sherry and port from my college's vintage cellars, likewise. Champagne, even—and free for the two weeks before Lent following some ancient bequest. My shelves are dusted, my bed is made and changed, my clothes are whisked away to be washed, starched and ironed. Were it not for the distraction of the students (whom the more academic dons avoid) it would be possible for me to spend my entire time working, thinking, writing, talking—contributing to the steam of the great intellectual engine house that Oxford is supposed to be, and perhaps once truly was.

From outside, drifting through the open mullioned window, raising the corners of my freshly-written sheaves of paper, the warm air brings the chant and the tread of Christlow and his fellow EA members as they parade on the ancient grass of our college quad. The sound has become so familiar to me now that it is as soothing as the clock chimes, dove coos, the sigh of trees, hesitant piano scales, dim voices and the clatter of footsteps which fill the essential silence which underlies this great dreaming city. Settling down again at my chair, I gaze out at them, then glance briefly down at my watch, nursing the knowledge that I only have half an hour of the morning left before I must get up and keep yet another medical appointment. Recently, it is this need for urgency that has often produced my best, most precise work.

12 o-clock comes amid a stagger of bells, faint and loud; and with it only one extra sentence done—and that crossed-out. I'd intended to skim

back towards the present from Nelson in Aboukir Bay, hinting at many links to come. But the sound of Christlow barking out instructions like a Butlin's bingo caller, and the ragged movements that he elicits from an odd assortment of students, a few younger dons (who, of course, insist that they're humouring him), college office workers and manual labourers, is too distracting, too here and now.

I weigh down my papers with a sea-smoothed stone, crack my fingers, and stand up. From marks on the cobweb walls of public toilets, the empty dust of old potting sheds, lost gasps of stifled satisfactions, to here… My few personal possessions seem out of place now as I look around at them. My hanging tweed jacket. My mother's old honeymoon suitcase with its hasp forever padlocked that peeks from beneath the bed next door. Her photograph and that of my father, thin and stiffly posed, in a tiny silver frame above the fireplace. Another photograph, smaller still, of a handsome young man, dark-haired against a lifeless white background, whom some people, flatteringly, assume to be me. A few shameful Eric Amblers on the bookshelves amid the cloth and leather-bound weight of Tort's monumental *France and England in the Middle Ages* and Stubb's massive *Constitutional History.* A new Baird *Dreamland De Luxe* radiogram (my one obvious luxury) squats in a low alcove, its fat marquetry face leering like a Martian. Within its sliding doors, I keep my prized collection of records. *Love Is The Sweetest Thing. Forty-Second Street. Blue Moon. Whispering Grass. A Nightingale Sang In Berkeley Square*… I once attempted to argue the merits of modern popular music with Bedford-Moles, Regius Professor of Divinity at a neighbouring college. Nowadays, I simply hide them behind Furtwangler's Beethoven.

Christlow's exercises have finished without my noticing. But for the click of shears in the walled herb garden, the midday air hangs still over the quad as I cross it. Once out in the street, I check once again the address on my appointment card. Not the Radcliffe this time—and further down Abingdon Road than I'd imagined. Too late for a bus, and I'll have to hurry if I'm going to walk.

12:45, P. Wiseman. Across the bridge, gull-like human cries and the reek of chlorine wash over me from the Open Air Baths. On the right, past Vicarage Road, I reach Saint Eustace Row, which is a lime-fronted edifice of old redbrick and rusted guttering that must be to do with one of the

colleges. Here, I've floated up into some higher echelon where all the threads of medicine meet. Eventually, if you're ill enough, you get to see the same specialists and going NHS or private no longer matters; the only difference is whether you get to chat afterwards over lunch at the club. Just the white plainness of this card, the fact that unlike some common GP, ward surgeon or anaesthetist, P. Wiseman doesn't even call himself a doctor—let alone list his qualifications—tells me that.

I'm shown straight down a surprisingly modern corridor and up a staircase where numerous dead stags have stuck their heads through the walls. A MIND YOUR HEAD sign leads to some older part of the building past a rusted coat of roundhead armour that looks as though it's been left there by its forgetful owner. Then a large door into an even larger room. I've become used to these twists and turns in Oxford: the rabbit-hole that leads to the ballroom, the hovel that backs onto the palace. I cross the rucked carpet and sit down on a big but uncomfortable wing chair to squint expectantly as P. Wiseman lights a cigarette from his gold case and the sunlight from the tall casement windows pours down around him.

"I'm glad you could make it," he says, spectacles glinting as the ormolu clock pings one. "I've been following the progress of your tests, and I think it's about time that you and I had a little chat." Pause for a smile. "About things."

"It's been," I shrug, sweaty and breathless, "a bit of a shock to me."

"Bit of a shock?" He nods thoughtfully. "Yes, yes. And you're what? Sixty Five?"

"Sixty. My birthday's next month."

"Mmmm." He glances down at his tear-off page-a-day calendar SUPPLIED BY BRIGHTON PHARMACEUTICALS as if he doubts me. THURSDAY 13 JUNE 1940. The letters seem to glow in the sun, so brightly rainbowed at their edges that I wonder if this isn't some other new symptom I'll have to try to explain. There's a day's motto, too—*Fata Obstant*—which means nothing to me, not knowing Latin.

Then P. Wiseman begins to tell me about my disease. About how each cell in my body is a single entity; and how I am comprised of a whole vast nation of such cells, all of which are working busily together. They live and they die and proceed about the business of their lives much as I proceed about my own. And each of them has a blueprint that it passes down to its

offspring which contains details about who they are, and which particularly fleshy city, factory, warehouse, sewerage works, temple, library or brothel they're supposed to belong to. But sometimes there is a delinquent, an errant messenger. It thinks it has a role greater than that properly granted to it. And it makes others in its likeness, and they in turn procreate and pass on this false message, and grow and spread.

I nod occasionally, and ask one or two questions. None of this biology seems to have much do with me. Soon, I find myself settling sleepily into these words and the soft wood-and-leathery aura of this Oxford room, which is like so many others that I've been in. P. Wiseman, he could be studying the behaviour of the electron or the Siberian squirrel for all you could tell. There are no changing screens here, no implements, no kidney bowls, no bloody wads of cotton wool. The volumes along the wall are Carlyle, Boswell, Dante, Euripides. There's a long photo of the arms-folded rugby team of one or other of the major public schools. A decent painting of a middle-aged but still glamorous woman in a blue evening gown. Another photo of P. Wiseman himself shaking hands with Deputy Prime Minister Arkwright on the steps of some stately home at the beginning of some conference. Outside, framed in redbrick and ivy, lies a striped and mown lawn much like my college's own quad. It's the same manicured green square, I sometimes think, that you'd find at the heart of every Englishman…

"So I should give up that pipe, Brooke, if I were you."

"What?"

"Your pipe. You have one sticking out of your top pocket. So I assume…"

"Right." I reach up and touch the smooth wooden bowl. The feel of it is pretty much the only pleasure that I've really ever got from the thing, anyway, and it never did do much for my scholarly image.

"Try these." He waves a fresh-lit Players Nation, which leaves a sky-writer's vapour trail behind it. "Or you could try the new Lambert menthol-tipped."

"The thing's been making me cough anyway."

"I'm not surprised. You people are down past Brasenose, by the way, aren't you?"

"Yes."

“Never been there much myself, you know. I’m a Magdalene man. Still tend to stick to the older colleges.”

By that, P. Wiseman means medieval, rather than plain old Elizabethan like my own. He stares at me, probably wondering whether to start asking if I know so-and-so, or have I heard the news about old-whatsit getting the clap on a fact-finding trip in Gujarat. Perhaps he thinks we might talk as intellectual equals. But you never know what to expect these days, the way Oxford has become: filled with people like me.

“Still, Brooke, I’m sure your lot keep busy.”

“I’m working on a book at the moment, actually,” I hear myself saying.

“Hmmm?”

“About historiography—the actual study of history itself. It still remains a neglected subject.”

“I’m sure. And what line do you plan to take?”

“Basically, that the real influence played by the major figures of history—people like Napoleon, Alexander, even Buddha—has increased over the centuries. I mean, that the whole equation isn’t static.”

“Interesting. I’m no expert, but that’s pretty much the history-as-process line, isn’t it?”

“Well—”

“—But it’s always seemed to me that the argument you’re taking is based upon a fallacy. What you’re describing is simply the fact that more recent figures are better documented, and therefore seem to us to have a greater substance. I mean, we know too little about the real Siddhartha to know whether he actually had much personal influence on Buddhism. You could say much the same about Christ…”

I stare back at him.

“But we digress.” P. Wiseman taps out his cigarette in his cut glass IMPERIAL CHEMICALS ashtray with his surgeon’s hands and lights another from the flame—invisible in this sunlight—of an onyx lighter. “As I was saying, Brooke, I’ve been following your case, and giving it quite a lot of thought. Outwardly, you’re still in good enough health. I can see that. But as I think I explained, this tumour in your right lung has been growing for some time. With the problem of metastasis—I mean, of course, lymphatic spread—I really don’t think that there’s any need to operate.”

Not even any need for an operation! A stupid bubble of joy rises up from my stomach, then dissolves.

"Just how far has it spread, then?"

"Along the spinal cord, I'm afraid. Into the liver. The other lung, too. Possibly elsewhere…"

I nod slowly, remembering a potato I once found at the back of my mother's larder. It had gone to seed, shooting out pale runners along the walls and behind the shelves.

"I'm sorry, Brooke," he adds, realising that I hadn't worked this out before.

I lick my lips. "How long," I ask, "have I got?" It's one of those clichéd lines you can't avoid in these circumstances.

"At the very best, two years. Possibly less than one. I'm afraid you'll need to make plans straight away…"

But I'm floating by then. Everything else that P. Wiseman has to say to me is lost.

In fact, I'm very annoyed with myself by the time I finally step back out into the sunlight. I'm even annoyed with myself about feeling annoyed. So stupid, stupid. The idea that you might eventually die is something that you get used to as you grow older, but actual *death* is quite different. Death that could stop you seeing this year's Wimbledon. Death that makes it pointless to buy a decent pair of shoes that'll last you through next winter.

Somehow, I hadn't realised that having lung cancer meant not just being ill, not just having my life shortened, but really dying.

I feel so angry.

Back in my rooms, I crouch over my desk trying to hammer out the many extra words, lines, sentences and pages that I know I must complete if I am ever to finish *The Fingers Of History.* But the process seems meaningless; a few more phrases thrown on the dungheap of all the other rubbish that's been written. What's the point of analysis? Napoleon existed, but now he's gone, and we'll never know what he was really like. And even if we did, what difference would it make? There would still be the horrors the Peninsular Campaign, the retreat from Russia. They're written in blood, not in ink. If I'd been there, yes, then, it might have been different. The little Corsican was clever and charismatic, but surely anyone could see that he

was a disaster in the making for all of Europe? Knowing what I now know—perhaps even being something like the person I now am, risen to my bogus position by terror and revolution in that strangely similar period of history—I would have killed him with a pure heart as he strode along the simpering lines of minor academics at some pompous ceremony. Then, where would history be? Changed for the better, by my own bloody hands…

By late afternoon, my head is buzzing. I snap at Christlow when he peeks around the door to ask if I'll be eating at Hall tonight, or perhaps just a few slices of smoked ham and a crusty cob on a tray up here? I don't feel hungry, and the sour taste in my mouth that I'd been putting down to Four Square Ready-Rubbed or a summer cold has grown stronger. Is this another of the symptoms that Wiseman mentioned? What exactly *does* happen when a tube of flesh starts to entwine your spinal cord?

Pulling on my jacket, purchasing twenty Navy Cut Unfiltered at Dobsons on the corner, breaking several matches, then taking long, bitter drags, I find myself wandering the city as evening floods in. For a while, I hardly notice where I am. There are bell towers, of course, copulating heaps of bicycles, ramshackle third-year student digs and bursting-at-the-seams secondhand bookshops; things to step around or fall over. People are heading home from work, getting on with the tricky business of being satisfied, healthy, ordinary. Alive.

Now, I can easily see the futility of all the pages I have written; even if my supposed book were ever finished, then got around the censor and was deemed correct and saleable and was actually published, the thing would still be worthless. I can see, too, the insignificant and easily-filled space that my whole life will soon leave. A few clothes hanging in a wardrobe, an old suitcase beneath a bed, some marks on a toilet cubicle wall…

I decide, once I've taken my bearings by Tom's Tower, to call in again at the Gents by Christ Church Meadow. It's not far; basically, I've been wandering in circles. The worn stone steps set with black and white mosaic, the welcoming doorway with its municipal crest, the smell of male wee and toilet block, all greet me like an old friend. The War veteran is just finishing mopping the floor, whistling tonelessly to himself after a long day wrestling with *John Bull's* crossword. I notice for the first time as he wrings his mop into the bucket that he only has one hand.

My feet leave a trail across his clean wet tiles, and he watches as I select the middle cubicle and push in my halfpenny and close the door and slide the brass blot. Nearly two weeks now, but there's still no further mark on the green-painted walls. *Dot, dot, dash, dash*—then somehow, it all stops at the time my acquaintance made his usual thumbnail invitation the Sunday before last.

It's a mystery, although I've lived long enough to have experienced this sort of thing before. These ritual appointments never do last. People change. They get sick of themselves. Their wives find out. They suddenly decide that buggery's not really *them* at all. They get beaten up, arrested, fall for someone else with a tighter bum, or move areas. You can't expect Christmas cards. And I'm grateful, really, that this parting of the ways has coincided so well with my own sudden mortality—and a final realisation of the essential pointlessness of sex. But I'm also worried for him.

I come out of the cubicle again, realising that I haven't done anything, or even bothered to flush. The veteran glances back over his shoulder as he gives John Arthur's photo over the urinals a final wipe. I press my hand to my stomach and mutter something about feeling ill, and how it's passed now. *Take care*, he mutters—or something like it as the soles of my shoes tick across the tiles. Long after I'm outside, his gaze still seems to follow me.

The sound of voices and the smell of cooking drift through half-open suburban windows as darkness thickens and I wander further out from the city. All these streets. All these houses. Here, at the centre of a front lawn, someone has laid out the Empire Alliance circle-cross in house leeks and saxifrage. A child, ready for bed in her nightie, parts the curtain of her window and gazes out at me. Her lips are moving. *Mummy, who's that funny man?*

I am weary. My whole body is stiff and cold as I walk past parked and uniform rows of Morris Ladybirds, the "people's car" which is manufactured in vast quantities just down the road at Cowley. They all look like jelly moulds. I turn from the little lawns and fake-castellations of semi-detached and semi-skilled Lancelot Street onto the wider middle-management and mock-Tudor expanses of Falstaff Road. The street lamps nod their heads wisely. A cat yowls. A baby cries. A dustbin lid bangs down in an alleyway.

I was born in Lichfield—which, then as now, is a town which calls itself a city—in the year 1880. It's middle England, neither flat nor hilly, north or south. And so far from the sea that there's one of the stone markers nearby asserting that it—and not Meriden, Banbury, or even Hexham as James I once claimed in his cups—marks the proper centre of England. Barring Doctor Johnson being born and a messy siege in the Civil War, nothing much has ever happened there.

Thinking about it all now, the way that things have turned out, my parents were pioneers of much that has since happened in Britain. They owned their own house in one of the newer and more decent terraced developments that were then springing up around Stow Pool and behind the Cathedral. Inside toilet, running hot and cold, built-in stove, decorated picture rails. I really don't know exactly how they came to meet each other and get married. They always seemed unsure themselves—it was just one of those things that happen to you, like the job you ended up doing, having a minor operation, or losing your hair—although they agreed that it probably had something to do with a shared distant relative. They were both of good Midlands stock; my family tree soon gets lost in meandering repetitions of Johns and Marys, Smiths and Coopers, carpenters and stockmen. Of course, there was talk about some great old house and all the wealth that a scandalous uncle had squandered. There always is. I can even remember my grandmother who lived in Malvern claiming to have been a childhood friend—at least a schoolmate—of Edward Elgar. Not that she really knew who he was when I questioned her, other than that he had done well for himself.

I remember the rainbows of light that the glass pendants of the parlour lamp used to throw across the wall. A single child, I also remember feeling bored at home and looking forward to and then enjoying school, although somehow wishing there was more to it. I wanted to know about kings and queens, volcanoes and other planets, sea monsters… I had little time for passing around jars filled with object lessons—a bit of honeycomb, a monkey's femur—or copying letters onto a slate, or ploughing through shared copies of *Little Black Sambo* and *Down On The Farm.*

My father worked for Lichfield Corporation. He had a title that changed once or twice amid great glory and talk of more ambitious holidays, but he was always Assistant-this and Deputy-that—one of the

great busy-but-unspecified (“Well, it’s quite hard to explain what I do unless you happen to be in the same line yourself…”) who now so dominate this country. Basically, he was an accounts clerk, and when he came home each evening, he smelled of underarms and India ink and rubber. Once I was old enough to make my own cheese sandwiches, my mother took a job at Hindleys’ Cake Shop on Bird Street. Dough and raisin buns—another smell that returns to me. She’d often bring home squashed battenburgs like broken bits of board game, or the stale and fly-blown remains of the hollow wedding cakes that were displayed in Hindleys’ window for a month or two. *Here’s a treat for you, son…* A crunchy spiral of icing. Little diamonds of angelica that looked and tasted like snot.

Even then, long before I had the faintest idea what sex was, I knew that I was different. It always seemed as though I was stuck in some odd pattern, clothed and yet naked like that Emperor in the fable, in a way that other people either ignored or simply didn’t see. My mother snapped at me when I tried to question her about these feelings. I suppose that at that time, seeing me perhaps as too frail—but not in the physical sense, you understand; but not quite *mannish* enough, somehow too sensitive—she had her own worries, although they were probably as ill-defined as my own. My father just hummed to himself and got on with his job and his garden and his spreading commonwealth of allotments around which he would trundle his wheelbarrow until he died of a heart attack on the little hill up Gaia Lane. A fall of flowerpots. The children sniggering at the funny man with the quivering legs until a travelling newspaper salesman happened along. He tossed out the rest of the pots and wheeled my father way all the way up to St John’s Hospital. But he could have saved his time and gone straight to the Maddox’s the Undertakers in Market Place. My father was already dead.

Still, my mother and I had his pension and his life insurance; there again, we were ahead of our time. And we had the house. We were never that stretched, and those complicated holiday trips to grey corners of the English coastline had never been much fun. By this time—I was eleven—I’d already decided I wanted to be a teacher. Until I passed into Secondary School from Stowe Street Elementary, I was always one of the brightest in my class, and I fondly imagined that I’d continue to hold my own in this slightly more elevated company. Egged on by my insular sense of superiority, even a County Scholarship to Rugby seemed within reach. And

from there, yes, I was already dreaming of the Magdalene Deer, sleek bodies bathing in the Cherwell at Parson's Pleasure, Jack Marvel in Quiller-Couch's *The Splendid Spur,* the bold laughter across Tom Quad of a thousand half-baked-and-headstrong Oxford heroes.

My later years in school, though, were a slog. I sensed already that I was hitting a permanent ceiling—that, without my having had much say in it, my life was already determined. Partly from struggling to keep pace amongst cleverer lads (all prototype bank managers, chartered accountants, KSG high-ups and solicitors) who could easily outdistance me, I fell ill with something that may or may not have been scarlet fever. On my long stay away from school, a boy called Martin Dawes who I had little liking for but was supposedly a friend would call in each afternoon to deliver school books and sit with me. Whilst up in my room, he would slip his hands beneath the sheets and the waistband of my pyjamas and toss me off—as if that, too, was a message that needed to be delivered from school. Of course, I was deeply grateful.

Later, towards the end of my school years as I grew fitter and more resigned to my fate, there were the usual abrasions and obsessions. I recall a schoolmaster named Mr. Lockwood once helping me—for a whole good and glorious hour, it seemed—to don my cricket box as I struggled to hide my growing erection. It only occurred to me later that his breathy attentions were slightly unusual. But Mr. Lockwood had gone by then; he'd dissolved into the scholarly mists, leaving only a faint odour of unspecified scandal in his wake. And so had Martin Dawes, whom I never really did get to like despite everything. Still, as I took and passed my Highers and then scraped my Second Class Teacher's Certificate and left school and found a job as an Assistant Master at nearby Burntwood Charity, as I reached the tender age of seventeen and became what was then looked on as a man, these few moments remained almost the sole fuel of my masturbatory fantasies.

Sometimes, locked in the upstairs toilet with its freezing seat and ever-open window as my mother shuffled about down in the kitchen, I would dutifully try to incorporate women into my pink imaginings in the vague hope that they would make me feel less guilty about the act that I was performing. But at some vital moment, their chests would always flatten and their groins would engorge as they stepped towards me, cropped and clean and shining, bearing in their golden-haired hands the ever-more

elaborate straps and protuberances of pseudo-cricket boxes. But then, what did I know about women? From the look of them, and were it not for the occasional classical statue, you'd have imagined that the bosom was a single fleshy appendage. And as for what went on in that smooth marble space between their legs… I was as innocent as most people were then, and knew little enough about the functioning of even my own anatomy. The ability, for example, to pull back my foreskin from the glans of my penis was something that I imagined as a cross I had to bear; my own special deformity.

It was thus at some expense and considerable embarrassment that I took the trouble of going down to Birmingham one summer weekend to purchase some photographs in the hope that would give me a clearer idea. I had convinced myself by then that, with the right knowledge of the female anatomy, I would finally understand. But when I opened the envelope back in my bedroom that night, I found that I was shocked, confused, embarrassed. Breasts, I knew about—at least in theory. But *this* was the holy grail? I immediately renounced all thoughts of sex and resigned myself to a lifetime of selfless celibacy.

A week later, I was back on the train to Birmingham, and then along the same smelly Digbeth streets, shaking with nerves as I entered the plain-fronted shop offering *Novelty Art-Works and Souvenirs.* I explained that, man of the world that I was, my lady friend had expressed an interest in acquiring a similar set of photographs to the ones that I had purchased; but this time, of men. I had glimpsed the things, tantalisingly, the week before, sliding about in one of the long felt-lined drawers that the shop's proprietor had opened. Thicker arms, smoother bellies—and could that really be the casual flop against a hairy thigh of an actual *penis*? Reptile-eyed, unspeaking but for the matter of money, the proprietor handed me an envelope. Several days later, in a fit of self-disgust, I destroyed these, too. But by then it was too late. Things were as firmly set in my mind as they had long been in my body. I was—now that I finally got around to looking up the name in one of the bigger medical dictionaries that dared to include such monstrous afflictions—a homosexual; an invert.

That, in the personal history of what I term my pre-Francis days, was the sole extent of my sexual development. There were no mad choirmasters, no smooth-talking deviant older friends, no ambushes by rapacious tramps,

no bumps on the head sustained while bicycling, or desperate anonymous letters to Baden-Powell. There was just me and my guilty semi-celibacy, and helping my suddenly frail mother look after her house, and watching the lads I'd known at school grow up, leave home, marry, start families.

Just as I had resigned myself to puzzled but inactive deviancy, so, by the time I was in my early twenties, I had also come to accept my position as a Second Class Teacher for the Senior Standard Threes at Burntwood Charity. Even getting promoted to First Class Teacher seemed unlikely, at least until the tyrant His Majesty's Inspector Mr. Rathbate retired. My horizons were limited. South Staffordshire, then as now, was predominantly a mining and agricultural community. Despite the regulations, many of the children were no longer attending school by the age of ten, but assisting their mothers and fathers in a trade. Some of those who did bother to stay on until thirteen did so because they were intelligent and hoped to transfer into Secondary or even Grammar school. Others remained because they were too retarded to do anything else—Billy Choggin, I remember, was only thrown out from behind the desk where he sat hunched and picking at his warts when someone realised he'd turned seventeen.

In the articles with which I began my career in the *Daily Sketch* nearly thirty years later, I gave the impression that John Arthur was one of my brightest and most ambitious pupils, a little comet trail across the pit-dusty Burntwood skies. Thanks to numerous flowery additions by the *Sketch's* copy editor, I also stated that he was pale-skinned, quiet, good-looking, intense, and that he possessed a slight West Country accent, this being the time before it had changed to the soft Yorkshire that we all know now—all traits which would have got him a good beating up in the playground—and that, on summer evenings after school when the pit whistle had blown and the swallows were wheeling, he and I would walk up into "the Staffordshire hills" and sit down and gaze down at the spires of Lichfield, the pit wheels of Burntwood and the smokestacks of Rugeley from the flowing purple heather.

Now, after all these years of practice, those pretty images have become like the tales of your own infancy that you absorb as a child, and become vivid, treasured memories. It's been my party act, too, a fundamental part of my life, ever since my name—or at least that of Geoffrey Brook—was mentioned by John Arthur as a childhood mentor in his maiden speech

before the old House of Commons. So, yes, I do remember the boyhood of John Arthur. He really is there in that classroom at Burntwood Charity with all the other children and the smell of chalk dust and unwashed bodies, the whispers of tension and the straining of the clock as they await the Friday evening bell and the glorious afternoon that shimmers outside to enfold them. His hand is raised from the third row of desks, his sleeve slipping back to show a thin wrist to ask a more than usually pertinent question before I start to ramble on about one of my many pet subjects. That is how I recall him.

The fact is, I've always enjoyed being a teacher. I still do. It's just that I'm far happier talking about the failures of Captain Franklin or the flower-like symmetry of the Henry VIII's coastal forts than I am building up the fat blocks of information that are supposedly the foundations of a proper education now; the sort of thing that's so well defined that every ten year old in the country is probably reading the same page of the expurgated *Gulliver's Travels* at exactly the same time. Still, I like to think that it was a different John Arthur who misremembered the name of Griffin Brooke and his leapfrogging enthusiasms when his power finally touched me. Someone who understood love and knowledge.

Too weary to stop, trailing cigarette smoke, memories, abstractions, I wander these new suburban streets. Here in Oxford, despite the many ways that my external life has changed, everything else about me seems much the same. I still yearn for closeness and understanding. I still play, despite the grasshopper weaknesses of my mind, at being an intellectual. I still feel, far too many times and in far too many ordinary situations, clumsy and foolish and naive. I'm still waiting, really, for my life to start. Now, it will soon be ending…

The thought slides off me, still too large to comprehend. I sense my consciousness cowering like a trapped animal before it, twisting this way and that as it tries to get out of the way. My thoughts go heedlessly back towards John Arthur, and then my book, and then the subject of next week's tutorials. Anything, in fact—*anything*—other than the one big, overwhelming truth.

Past a space of fenced building sites. 8/10 WEEKLY OR £50 DOWN. GUARANTEED MODERN HOMES. NEARLY EVERY HOUSE HAS A GARAGE

SPACE. Illuminated artists' impressions of fireside families, bay-windows, honeysuckle walls, cats sleeping on doorsteps. Then Gladstone Drive, where the posters are made real. Perhaps a recently-constructed Disraeli Road also lies around the corner. Perhaps Disraeli's accepted now just as he was in his lifetime; scarcely a Jew at all with his clever flattery of making an Empress out of our dowdy old Queen, his canny embracement of Christianity. Who knows? These things change so quickly.

I pass illuminated porches bearing individual name-plates—CHURCH HOUSE. DAWRIC. THE WILLOWS.—in wrought iron, chinaware or poker-work. It's quiet now, although scarcely past nine and only just getting fully dark. The houses have a sleepy look. Their curtains are drawn. Faintly, like the movement of ghosts, I can see the shimmer of television screens. The people of Greater Britain have taken so quickly to these flickering dreams. Rooftop aerials point towards the new transmitters with orderly precision. The shop windows of electrical shops along every high street are filled with invasions of greenish-grey Cyclops eyes. Each night, the walls of millions of darkened lounges fill with the shadows of marching bands, high-stepping dance routines, the rheumy leers of northern comics.

A footstep scuffs in the street behind me. The sound is so unexpected that I turn and look back. There's silence now. Whoever it is has stopped, and for a moment the street seems empty, the pale concrete road shining beneath the lights and the gathering stars. Then I see where the figure is standing, far too squat and large in the shadow of a parked delivery van to be my slim-bodied acquaintance. A chill sense of watching fills me and a loud pulse begins to beat in my ears as I walk towards it. The thing seems deformed; hardly a figure at all—in fact, nothing but a postbox. And all around me there is only silence. People shut indoors, and living their lives.

I walk on more briskly. The sense of being followed is still hard to shake from my shoulder. OBERON DRIVE. HAZEL OAK ROAD. I'd be lost by the winding samey look of everything, were it not for the fact that these particular streets are familiar to me. Once or twice before, and equally furtively, I have walked these pavements. Beyond that patch of grass where BALL GAMES ARE PROHIBITED, and a stand of oak trees which must have shaded generations of cattle when this was all fields, lies the home of my acquaintance. His two girls will have been put to bed by now, today being a Thursday and their needing to be fresh for school tomorrow. I'd like to

think that he and his wife are more cultured than to empty their minds with Jack “Mind My Bike” Warden, *The Clarksons*, *ITMA* or whatever is on television tonight. We’ve never discussed such things, but perhaps they tune instead to the Third Programme on their radio-gramophone and settle back to Malcolm Sargent conducting live from the Albert Hall. A chance, as *The Swan Of Tuonela* plays, for my acquaintance to talk about the way things are going down at the Censor’s Office, and then to plan for the weekend; how they might take the Sunday excursion train and spend the whole day together on Lambourn Downs. My acquaintance, he could easily skip his usual lunchtime trip to the pub, his afternoon in the garden, his evening constitutional walk…

My footsteps drag now. My lungs and my throat throb and ache. A few bedroom lights are showing in the houses, then puffing out. Already, it’s later than I imagined. The tellies have shrivelled to a white dot, the concert halls have emptied, and all the Jims and the Betties will soon be abed; merrily, guiltlessly, fornicating. Yet, twisted angel of death that I am, I feel a sense of watching from those curtained windows.

Number 4 Portia Avenue’s black-and-white gable looms into view: the privet and the long strip of drive that lead towards the side of the house where, in these days of ever-growing prosperity, a Ladybird car will probably soon replace the sturdy Raleigh that my acquaintance currently cycles to work on. *Old Fatguts can’t last long now, love, and then it’ll be me in that office. My name on the frosted glass*… The windows of his house, too, are darkened. But, unlike the others around it, they are also uncurtained. And, in this flowing summer darkness, there is something odd about the look of the panes, and even of the flowerbed that separates the house from Number 6 next door. A few weeks ago, I’m sure, it was filled with a military row of tulips. Now it seems messed, flattened.

My feet crunch on something sharper than gravel as I find myself walking up the path to my acquaintance’s front door, which I never imagined I would do outside my dreams. Many of the windows have been shattered, and a fat iron padlock has been fitted across the door’s splintered frame. There is a pervasive, summery smell of children’s urine.

I see, last of all, the sign that the Oxford Constabulary have pasted on the porch. TAKE NOTICE HEREBY… But this sky is incredibly dark and deep for summer, and even the streetlamps are out; I can’t read further than the

Crown-embossed heading. I slump down the doorstep, scattering empty milk bottles, covering my face with my hands. At long last, it all seems to come to me. This. Death. The end of everything.

When I look up some time later, I realise that a figure is watching me from the quiet suburban night.

"I know," it repeats. "This must be a shock to you."

I nod, scuffing the heel of my hand as I struggle to my feet.

"Knew them well, did you?"

"N—not exactly."

The figure, smaller than I am, clearly female, takes a step across the crazy paving. Housecoat and slippers. A steely glint of curlers. "Come on, then. I'll get you some tea. We're only next door…

"I'm Mrs. Stevens," she tells me, wisely keeping her first name to herself as she potters about with the teapot and the kettle in the blinding brightness of her kitchen.

"My name's Brook," I say. I can't see any point in lying.

"I check the doorstep each day for the post," she says, twisting off the tap and giving her mottled fingers a shake. "Pass it on to our local bobby, although I'm sure he doesn't know what to do with it either. You'd think they'd know better, wouldn't you, than to keep sending *letters*? I mean, him virtually working in the Post Office and all. You'd like it sweet and strong, I expect?"

"Please."

I watch Mrs. Stevens as she warms the pot, then ladles in the tea. The kitchen, now that I can make out more of it, is surprisingly big. Windows on two sides, one with a fan-extractor. A white enamel machine that I suppose must be a refrigerator hums gently to itself in a corner. A cuckoo clock ticks above the sink. The tiles and the work surfaces shine.

"When did it happen?"

"It would be…" Mrs. Stevens tilts her head and squints up at the ceiling. She must be close to seventy, but a part of her still seems girlish. "The Sunday before last. About six o-clock, I'd say it was. In fact, pretty much dead-on, as Les and me had just finished our salad."

"They took them *all* away?"

"All of them. The pity of it really." She stirs her own tea and passes me mine. Blue willow-pattern china. "Them young girls."

“Nobody did anything to stop it?”

She gazes across at me, and licks a brown line of tea that’s gathered on her small grey moustache. “I’ll tell you what they were like, Mr. Brook. In every way, I’d have said, they were a decent couple. Only odd thing I remember now is they sometimes used to leave the light on without drawing the curtains so you could see right in… The lassies were nice, though. They fed our cat for us when we went up to Harrogate last year, although of course the poor thing’s got run over since. Probably that dreadful new road, trying to get back to his old hunting grounds. Silly puss…”

“You were saying.”

“There’s not much to say, really, is there? The way things have turned out. Shameful, though. Lets down the neighbourhood, especially what’s been done to the house since they left, mess and bricks through the window. But you know what the kids were like. Knew them well yourself, did you?”

“He was just an acquaintance. I hardly had any contact with the rest of the family.”

“Like I say, they seemed decent as you or I. Made no fuss when my Les was putting up the summer house at the back and got building sand all over their roses. Laughed it off. I remember him saying, Mrs. Stevens, it just doesn’t matter. Put my Les’s back out, though, it did. He’s upstairs now. Asleep, most probably. Separate rooms, we are, since he had that trouble.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Mrs. Stevens. But when they came to the house, was it the KSG or did—”

“—and you’d never have known, would you, to look at her?”

“Her? You mean…?”

“Ah…” Mrs. Stevens slaps her hand flat down on the table and leans forward, her brown eyes gleaming, almost childlike in her excitement. “So you still don’t know the truth of it? Well, that’s understandable, I suppose, cos, just like they say, you really never can tell. I mean, even you—I’ll be honest, Mr. Brook—it crossed my mind till I got a good look at you out of the dark. You can’t be too careful, can you?”

“No. I suppose not. I’m sorry, Mrs. Stevens, but I’m still confused.”

“Her real name, it seems, was something Polish before she married. All *xs* and *ys* and *zs.* Her parents came over here after the War, changed it to

something proper." She hurrumphs. "Hood, I think it was—but even that doesn't quite right, does it?"

"I suppose they were thinking of Robin."

"Robin?"

"Don't mind me, Mrs. Stevens."

"Not that I've got anything against the Serbs in their own country."

"You mean Poles?"

"Yes. And a few of them over here—it's understandable that they *want* to come, isn't it—just as long as they don't make themselves a burden, earn a decent living, talk like we do and don't bother our children and keep themselves to themselves and make a proper effort to fit in."

"So what was the problem?"

"She was a Jew, wasn't she. All these years they've been living next door and acting all normal and hiding it from us. I mean, it's the *deceit* I really can't stand. And *he* must have known. Must have been in it with that job of his, and helped her fake the papers when they married. Her with coming round through that door in a sunhat sometimes to give me a few extra cuttings for the rockery Les was working on." Mrs. Stevens raises her shoulders and shudders theatrically. "To think of it. It's the *dishonesty.* And her nothing but a dirty little Jew."

The cuckoo clock whirrs and pings. A wooden bird with glass eyes sticks out its head and stares down at us for a moment as it toots breathlessly. Eleven o-clock already.

It's far later than I'd expected.

3

CLOUDS SWEEP IN ACROSS Oxford, thick and grey as wet cement. Rain brims over the low surrounding hills and washes away the hope of what had promised to be another spectacular summer. Cars hiss by on gleaming streets. Pedestrians dodge cascades from sluicing gargoyles. Queues of galoshes, wet coats and sodden umbrellas fill the doorways beneath college arches with a sick, rubbery smell.

Ascot is a wash-out; horses and high-heeled women sink deep in the paddock, hats are ruined and Best Boy, the King's own horse and hottest favourite in years, pulls up lame in front of the Royal Box in a sea-spray of mud; a story that fills the front pages of next morning's damp-at-the-edges newspapers. In the whitewashed yard of Oxford's town prison on the hissing grey dawn, two men are hanged for their part in an attempted mail robbery. But few turn up to watch, and it barely makes page five of that evening's *Oxford Mail.*

In Honduras, the British prefix lost to revolution in 1919 is restored when General Avetin succeeds in a bloody coup and asks to re-join the Empire. A car bomb in the Trans-Jordan kills fifteen German League of Nations soldiers. Plebiscites in the Gold Coast and Rhodesia confirm their population's acceptance of newly-restored British Governors. In India, as ever, there are uprisings and massacres.

Gone With The Wind, a film that most people want see despite the fact that it comes from decadent America and Bette Davis pinched the Scarlett O'Hara role from our own Vivien Leigh, is given the Modernist stamp of approval when it is premiered in the West End in the sprucely uniformed presence of Jim Toller, Major-General of the Knights of Saint George, the ubiquitous KSG, and Commander-in-Chief of the British Armed Forces. John Arthur, typically, is quoted to have said that he too would liked to have attended, but happened to be too busy.

Despite P. Wiseman's apparent pronouncement of my death sentence, there are still many tests and indignities for me at the Radcliffe. I am congratulated on my resilience and given the kind of drugs that I suspect could trace their origins back to the Chinese opium dens. Pain, when it does

come, fills up my bleak sense of absence, and I can feel, if I press my skin lightly, a walnut-sized lump just to the left of my ribs. Why is it always walnuts, I wonder? Where are the plums, cherries, conkers, cobblestones, quail's eggs of human pathology…?

Back at college, as the University presses along Walton Street begin to churn out acres of examination papers and Trinity Term slips past the half-way mark, many of the students begin to look ill-kempt and pale, their hair lank; their voices, as they attempt to make themselves heard in seminars over the chatter of rain through antique lead gutters, sound lost. It's the bright ones I feel sorriest for; middle-class lads and lassies who've pushed hard to get here through late nights of eye-stinging revision, grants and bursaries, enduring the bemusement of their family and friends. Like me, although probably with better reason, they thought that a different Oxford lay at the end of the dream.

It doesn't pay, after all, to be *too* clever nowadays. Merely bright will do just fine. After all, the students at Oxford have to put up with teachers like me, whom they should properly have left behind them when they went to a decent grammar school. A couple of days ago, for example, staring out during a tutorial at the quad's dripping oak at the hunched figure that sometimes seems to be standing beneath it, I lost the thread with one of my best students as we discussed his essay on the reforms of Peter the Great. He gazed back at me in polite amazement as I talked, but said nothing. I only realised after he had gone that my thoughts had got tangled in the pages of my book, and that I had been going on about not Peter the Great, but Alexander.

But BC or AD—Ancient Greece or Imperial Russia—what use anyway is the solemn study of history? Give me instead a few juicy stories of Empress Catherine or the complex morning ritual that was the Emptying of the Chamber Pots at Versailles. I've always had this gossipy view of my subject—more Charles Lawton and *The Private Lives of Henry VIII* than anything to do with the reality of the past, when life was surely no grander or funnier then than it is now, and probably made just as little sense. All the rest is a pretence of knowing the unknowable, or downright lies.

Oxford, meanwhile, as the rain continues and salty tidemarks rise in her stones, endures. She functions, as some wag must surely have remarked, in much the same way as a swan drifting amid the stranded benches of the

flooded Isis. All poise and grace above the surface. Much mad paddling beneath.

Living here at the time that I do, when for every undergraduate student there are two who are taking some lesser qualification or simply here for a weekend course; at a time when, whilst my college and a few others struggle to maintain the tutorial system, there is no essential difference between our degrees and ones obtained, say, at Carlisle Institute Of Further Education, I still find it hard to be certain if anything has really changed. Did not Lord Eldon pass his Finals simply by giving the name in Hebrew for The Place Of The Skull, and that of the Founder of University College? Did not Gibbon describe his time at Oxford as the most idle and unprofitable of his life? Instead of the Lords and Baronets who used to cram the place, it's true there are now many sons and indeed daughters of KSG Majors, Town Council Chairmen, Empire Alliance District Organisers and various other Modernist sycophants and high ups. But that in itself can hardly be described as making Oxford different—more a question of the old girl responding as she has always done to the ever-shifting times.

The editor of the *Daily Sketch* was probably right when he told me over a compensatory lunch at the Savoy that the time was no longer suitable for a weekly column filled with old-fashioned facts, and that the John Arthur connection was well and truly played out. And I despair as I work on my book of ever making any sense of history. It seems, to quote Gibbon again, little more than a register of cruelties, follies and misfortunes. For example, in the Year of Our Lord 1099, the First Crusade under Geoffrey of Bouillon captured Jerusalem from the infidels, then set about slaughtering the entire population. And in 1919, in Poland, Jews were gathered up by Nationalist gangs, stripped and flogged, then made to dig their own graves…

In Britain, the Jews have always been small in number, and, although there were savage pogroms in York, London, Norwich, Stamford and Lynn in the late 12th century, we've generally been tolerant. Before the rise of Modernism, my acquaintance and his family probably had little more to fear from exposure than a silence in the greengrocers as they entered and the occasional human turd stuffed through their letter box. After all, Jewishness isn't like homosexuality, madness, criminality, communism, militant Irishness: they can't exactly *help* being born with their grabby

disgusting ways, can they? Rather like the gypsies, you see, we didn't mind them *living*, but not here, not with us… In this as in so many other areas, all Modernism did was take what people said to each other over the garden fence and turn it into Government policy.

One of John Arthur's first acts when he finally became Prime Minister in 1932 was to push a bill through the then still-functioning Parliament authorising what was termed a new Domesday Book. This amounted to a detailed tallying not only of Britain's land, but also of her people, their racial background, their wealth, their contribution to society. From this many things followed. The issuing of identity cards. The reform of the tax and welfare system. The clear identification of minorities.

The unemployed, ex-offenders, Indians and the Irish were required to report twice-weekly to the local Police Station. Jews were dispossessed of their homes and shuffled to holding camps at the edges of towns. I can well remember the *Homeland for British Jewry* newsreels: they were probably one of the defining moments of early Greater British history. There they were, the British Jews clear in black and white as the projector flickered through the spiralling cigarette smoke above the one-and-sixpennies. Whole eager families of them helped by smiling Tommies as they climbed from landing craft and hauled their suitcases up onto the shingle of remote Scottish islands that had been empty but for a few sheep since the Highland Clearances a century before. It was hard not to think how genuinely nice it would be to start afresh somewhere like that, to paint and make homely the grey blocks of those concrete houses, to learn the skills of shepherding, harvesting, fishing.

So many other things have happened in Greater Britain since then that it has been easy to forget about the Jews. I remember a short piece on Pathé that I watched before Disney's *Snow White* in what must have been 1939 at the old Electra Cinema. By then they looked rustic and sunburned, their hands callused by cold winters of weaving and dry-stone walling, their eyes bright from the wind off the sea. Since then, nothing. A blank, an empty space that I find hard to fill even in my imagination.

Already, the same thing seems to be happening to my acquaintance. He's so faint to me now that I can hardly remember his face. It's as if he—his whole family—have been removed from history. For, despite all my snooping, it wasn't as if I knew him well. Since our first chance encounter

in the dank subterranean toilets beneath Park Street where the GWR and LNER stations meet, he has remained little more than a cock to me. It's easier that way. Of course, I've scanned the newspapers, and winkled out what little town gossip there is that penetrates these college walls. I have hung around the back of Oxford's Central Post Office, and have listened to the voices of the staff as they hurry home through the rain. I have pestered these same people at their counters with enquiries about what I can and cannot write to an imaginary aunt in Canada in the hope that I will draw down someone from the Censor's Department upstairs; perhaps even Old Fatguts himself—although, I have to remind myself, he's simply a creature of my own imaginings. I have caused consternation amongst the mothers waiting beneath their umbrellas outside the gate of his daughters' school. *You don't actually have a child at Saint Frank's, do you mate? So bugger off—anyway, you're too old. Who'd you think you are? Old git. You don't belong here…*

They're right, of course. I don't belong. One morning as thunder crackles and water streams and the whole college seems to shift and creak like a ship straining at its moorings, tutorial-less now the exams are close, purposeless now that my book seems more dead than alive, and in a more than usual amount of pain, I'm still marooned in my rooms when Christlow arrives at eleven to do the cleaning.

Still clearly reluctant to get on with his duties even after I've assured him that I don't mind in the least, Christlow pulls on his gloves and begins to dust the bookshelves. Pretending that I'm occupied at my desk, I steal glimpses of his bristled neck as he works. He's no more ordinary than I am really; living in a pokier version of a room like this somewhere in the college depths. Alone, unmarried. At the end of the day, I realise, I have little to fear from Christlow. It's the very obviousness of his allegiance to the Empire Alliance that makes him safe.

"You know the Jews, Christlow."

"Jews sir? Yes sir. Although not personally."

He pauses in his dusting. The situation already has a forced air.

"We seem to hear so little about them now."

"That would probably be right, sir."

"I was wondering—it's part of my book, you see—what happened to the mixed families. Where a Jew married a gentile…"

“I’m sure they were treated sympathetically, sir. Although for the life of me I can’t imagine there was ever very many of them.”

“Of course,” I nod, and force my gaze back to my desk, the blank sheet of paper my elbows have been leaning on. Christlow returns to his work, his lips pursed in a silent whistle amid the rain-streaming shadows as he lifts from the mantelpiece, the photos of my mother, my father, the good-looking dark-haired young man.

“So you’ll be alright, then, sir?” he asks, picking up his box of rags and polishes. “Fine if I leave you now?”

“Thank you, Christlow. As always,” I add, laying it on thick, “you’ve done a splendid job.”

He shoulders his way out of the door. When he’s gone and his footsteps have faded into the college’s loose stirrings, I slide in the bolt, then cross to the gloom of my bedroom and drag my mother’s old honeymoon suitcase from beneath the bed. Christlow’s complained about it being there once or twice—something about finding it hard to vacuum around. And I’m sure he’s fiddled with the padlock. Perhaps he’s even succeeded in getting inside, although the contents would surely disappoint him.

I always keep its key in my pocket. The case’s hinges creak as I open it, rusty from disuse, but nothing inside has changed. The tin toys. The tennis slacks. The exercise book with the name FRANCIS EVELEIGH inscribed into the cardboard cover in thick childish letters. A school badge. A Gillette safety razor—his first? An antique pistol wrapped inside a blue hand-knitted sweater. A decent-enough herringbone jacket. A single shoe. A steel hip flask. A soldier’s pass for 14–26 September 1916, cross-stamped NO LONGER VALID. Various socks and old-fashioned collarless shirts and itchy-looking undies. A copy of Morris’s *News From Nowhere.* And a Touring Map of the Scottish Highlands, folded so often that the sheets threaten to break apart as I touch them.

I grab a handful of his clothes and bury my face in them. Oxford damp. Oxford stone. Four Square Ready-Rubbed and Mansion House lavender floor polish. Little enough is left of Francis now. Still, that faint scent of his flesh like burnt lemon. A few dark strands of his hair…

What a joke I have become. My sole claim to fame is having dimly known a great man when he was still a child. And my sole claim to

happiness lies almost as far back, a miracle that happened to me for a few days nearly thirty years ago. I suppose I've convinced myself since that homosexuals cannot really love—it's easier that way. And yet at the same time, in all the years since, Francis had always been with me.

"It really doesn't matter, Griff," I hear him say as his fingers touch my neck. He smells not of lemons now, but of the rainy oak he's been standing beneath as he watches my window from the quad. But he hasn't aged. He hasn't changed.

"No, it doesn't matter at all," he whispers as he turns me round to kiss me. "Not any of this. That's the secret of everything."

I smile to find him near me, and still shudder at the cool touch of his hands. In the moment before the thunder crackles closer over Oxford and I open my eyes, all pain is gone.

4

ERNIE SVENDSEN, WITH HIS suspiciously foreign name, his long nose, his thick glasses, seems an unlikely survivor of my kind. He puts it down to something that he has on Oxford's Deputy Chief Constable, although I would have thought that would have made him a prime candidate for a hit-and-run car accident. More likely, he's betrayed so many people that the powers-that-be find him useful. He's known about me for years, too, has Ernie, although he has no direct evidence. I suppose I must be in a file somewhere, but in this as in many other ways, I lead a charmed life.

We meet at a park bench the next afternoon, during a break in the rain.

"Do you think they'll let them stay together?" I ask as he tosses bread from a brown paper bag to the feathered carpet of ducks that have gathered around us. "Will they send him to the Isle of Man, the girls and the mother to the Western Isles?"

Giving me a pitying look, Ernie Svendsen (he swears his parents were Anglo Saxon) shakes his head. "It doesn't work like that, my friend. Oh, they'll get it out of him if that's what they want. He'll tell them anything—lies or the truth. That's the problem they have to deal with. People always blab on so when you threaten them… I shouldn't worry," he adds, seeing the look on my face. "If something was going to happen to you, it would have happened already. Being who you are, I'm sure you'll be safe."

"I'm not who I am. I'm not anybody."

"Then you're doubly lucky."

"I keep asking myself what the point is. I mean—why?"

The bushes around us look hunched and sodden. Which one, I wonder, would someone choose to hide in if they were watching us? Following people must be a messy business, shuffling about in the earth and the rain. Hanging at street corners, looking at the play of shadows on lighted windows. Studying us humans as if we were strange elusive birds.

"I think you've forgotten what it's about, my friend," he says.

"What?"

"Being the way we are—bent, queer. The guilt. The stupid scenes. You remember those leaflets…" Ernie smiles to the elderly lady who picks her

way along the puddled path with her fat black Labrador. “You know, the promises of help, that we could be cured. Don’t tell me you didn’t secretly get hold of one of those leaflets they used to have at the Post Office. Don’t tell me you didn’t read it and want to believe.” He sighs. “If we could just press some button—pull out something inside us—don’t you think we’d all do it? Wouldn’t you take that chance, my friend, if you were given it? Isn’t John Arthur right in that respect?”

But that would mean re-living my life—becoming something other than what I am. Losing Francis. So I shake my head. And I’ve heard the stories. The drugs. The electrodes. The dirty pictures. Swimming in pools of your own piss and vomit. *That* kind of treatment that was available in these isles even before Modernism made it compulsory. “It isn’t John Arthur,” I say. “It’s all of us. It’s Britain…”

Ernie chuckles. “I suppose you’ll be alone now, won’t you?”

“Alone?”

“Without companionship. Without a cock to suck.”

I glance across the bench, wondering if Ernie’s propositioning me. But his eyes behind his glasses are as far away as ever; fish in some distant sea. Sex for him, I suspect, has always been essentially a spectator sport. That’s why he fits in so well. That’s why he’s survived. He doesn’t want a real body against him. All he needs is the sharp hot memories of those he’s betrayed. Crucified flesh. Blood-curdled semen. The wind crackles, rippling the pools that have gathered on the lawns, rattling the trees and the bushes. Spray of droplets patter around us.

“I’m really not interested in sex any longer,” I say. “So I don’t need you to set me up with anyone, Ernie, if that’s what you’re thinking. I just __”

“—Haven’t we all heard *that* one before!”

“Look, I don’t really care if you believe me. I just thought you might have some information about what happens to… To the Jews—and to people like us. Surely somebody has to?”

Ernie drags back his widow’s peak. “All I know is what I read in the papers, my friend. And what I see in the newsreels.”

“But no one’s ever come back, have they? I mean—from the Isle of Man. That’s what the big secret is. It’s no secret at all, although God knows what happens to them…”

“You can believe what you want. It’s what we all do.”

“I’m sorry I wasted your time.”

“That’s alright.” Ernie smiles at me again. “Nothing’s ever wasted.” His gaze darts across the silvered lawns, then he lets his cold fingers slide across the wet bench to touch my own. My skin creeps. Now, I really do wish that there was some button I could press. A way to cut this thing out of my life forever. “I understand how it is, my friend. We’re only human, after all. It’s always sad when you lose someone…”

His fingers give mine a squeeze. Then he stands up and shakes the last of his breadcrumbs over the ducks. They quack excitedly. Jewel-like water droplets are scattered across their backs. I watch Ernie as he walks off, splashing a short cut across the lawns and then around the sodden nets of the empty tennis courts. A factory shift hooter goes off. In the distance, like the turning of one vast clock, the bells of Oxford begin to ping and click and chime.

I head back along the paths, as lost as ever. And I can’t help wondering if there will be a black official KSG Rover waiting for me somewhere soon. The uniformed man with his orders neatly typed on HMSO paper. The polite request and the arm hooked around my elbow and the people passing by too busy going about their lives to notice. The drive to a dark clearing in a wood, the cold barrel to the forehead…

As I make my way down Holywell to the Bodleian Library past the old city walls, the clouds in the west begin to thin. The wind picks and plays with rents of blue sky, dragging them out through the tangled grey like skeins of wool. The sun flickers. The streets and the rooftops gleam as if freshly varnished. The air suddenly feels warm. Steam begins to rise.

The Bodleian’s open until eight now in the summer. There are none of those funny and unpredictable half days—another advantage of living in Modernist Britain. The light brightens, the steam thickens. I dawdle along the narrow, unpredictable streets that wind around the backs of the colleges and give alternate glimpses of kitchen dustbins and Wren towers. I seem to be moving in a land of ghosts. A plump cat smiles at me before disappearing into the snapdragon and ivy along a wall. A woman with a face like the Queen of Hearts is shrieking from an open upstairs window over a brassy avalanche of pealing bells. For all that I can tell, she might be yelling, *No! No! Sentence first—verdict afterwards.*

But Oxford. Oxford! All the years that I longed to see myself like this, on my way to the Bodleian—the very picture of academic greatness! It was something that occupied me even when my mother was still alive and I was working on a much earlier draft of my book. Although I'd never actually been to Oxford then, I knew it as some far-off Avalon, all myths, rumours and dreaming spires. I saw the quads and the beautiful buildings, the books, the whispering corridors of learning, the bat-like dons, the twin shining rivers. Graceful and free of care, I wandered in my imaginings with the chosen few as we talked and disported ourselves in the fragrant clouds of this academic heaven.

In those days, the real Oxford was almost entirely a male enclave. In my daydreams, it remained exclusively so. For I admit there was a twinge of the erotic to my yearnings. I suppose that in part it was the unmentionably controversial ghost of Oscar Wilde. I knew, by repute, of the trial concerning his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, although I couldn't imagine that they had actually *done* anything together. Apart from the Ancient Greeks, who were almost mythical anyway, I couldn't believe that any two men had ever really grappled with each other sexually. Still, by some odd personal antennae I picked up an aura about Oxford that was far from incorrect. Of course the great, gay, decadent days of the twenties and early thirties were still to come, with a generation of promising poets like Rowse, Waugh, Green, Auden, Sitwell, MacNeice and Betjeman whom I followed when I eventually subscribed to publications like *Outlook* waiting in the wings. Now—all lost, mad, emigrated, imprisoned, dead by so-called suicide—they are said to have been deviant to a man, and their names are excised from the University records.

Long before that, working each evening after school in the front parlour of our house as my mother nodded over her knitting in her chair behind me, I knew that I was still an impossibly long way from Oxford. But nourishing my one great work, I never even bothered to think of setting some more realistic target and perhaps submitting an essay on local history to the *Lichfield Mercury* or *Staffordshire Life.* It was all or nothing—and perhaps in my heart of hearts I was happy enough with nothing. I worked at that table by the window after teaching the rudiments of English and History to classrooms full of lads whom I passed in the street seemingly moments later and with a wife and a pram in tow. As easily as some faintly

flavoured and not entirely disagreeable medicine, my whole life was already slipping by.

One evening, I remember, the work at the parlour table was going particularly well. A chapter on Metternich that I'd written twice before suddenly came into bright focus—although I really can't imagine why I even wanted to write about him. The hours slid by. It was suddenly late evening. My eyes were tired and it was getting hard to read by the light of the tasselled electric lamp. There's always a pleasure in stopping writing before you've quite finished, in knowing that you have something to come back to. So it was with satisfaction that I cracked my weary fingers and turned around to my mother to comment on the faint but foul smell that I had suddenly noticed. She sat unusually still in the dimness of the room behind me. Her head was lolling, her fingers were clenched around the knitting needles and the ball of wool had rolled from her lap in her final spasm.

Once inside the Bodleian's musty maze, I set about the tricky business of obtaining some books that might tell me something concrete about recent Jewish history. First, I must reach the front of the queue at the Arts End. As I wait, my sense of pointlessness becomes stronger than ever. What am I doing here with so little time left to me—looking at *books*? Now, surely I should be able to shake off the habit.

The librarian behind the high desk has dark curly hair and a matching beard; he looks faintly nautical. After scanning my request form, he reaches into this jacket to swop his glasses and re-read it more closely.

"Just wait for a moment will you…" He spins off through an arched doorway inscribed *Medio Tutissimus Ibas*, whatever that means.

I gaze about at the wood-pillared walls, balconied with books, the ornate Tudor ceiling. All around me, the Bodleian buzzes like a busy railway station between trains. The general public are freely admitted now—although, of course, that no longer means tramps—and I, a don, must fill in form L4450-A(C) and wait my turn like anybody else. To anyone with any knowledge of Oxford history, a far greater sacrilege is the sign beside the bust of Wellington that points towards Lending. The Bodleian, as a copyright library, has kept its books strictly within its walls since it was founded in 1602. Not all that long ago, they were chained to the shelves.

Even Cromwell was refused permission to lend a single volume to the Portuguese Ambassador.

"We can just let you have a few of these. We simply don't keep Hansard for the years between 1918 and 1933…" The librarian is back. Wheezing behind him with a trolley is a red-faced messenger boy—who looks about eighty. "I've ticked them off on your list. These ones here…" He shoves a pile across the counter. "They're only for use within the premises. This lot, you can take out. In fact," he continues, helpful, most un-librarian like, "I've already franked them to save you having to trek over to Lending. If you'll just let me have your identity card…"

Dodging the cross-fire of black looks from the long and restless queue behind me, I stagger to a vacant desk. Smoke-signals of dust rise in the evening sunlight falling from the widows as, one by one, I flick through books that even now MUST NOT BE REMOVED FROM THE PREMISES. Mostly, they are official documents, census data, White Papers on Racial Minorities and Economic Development In The Scottish Highlands, Government leaflets with titles like *What To Do If You're A Jew* (report straightaway to the Duty Sergeant at your local Police Station—"don't worry, he'll have dealt with your problem many times before") and the more rarefied *The Question of Deviancy.* None of them tell me anything I don't already know.

The few older pre-Modernist books I've requested that have actually come through the system lie at the bottom of the pile, and sit there oddly. *The Forged Protocols Of The Learned Elders Of Zion. The Story of Jewish Bolshevism—A Warning To British Women.* Adcock's *Britain In The Twenties.* When I try to open the first one up, I realise why. Two thirds of the book's pages have been neatly excised with a knife. With the next, after the censor plainly grew tired of obliterating most of the print with long black stripes of his pen, it's the entire second half. The Adcock, which looks thicker, in fact contains nothing but a wad of old card indexes. I glance around me, expecting some kind of reaction, but the other people are busy at their desks, or chatting. A couple of schoolchildren even appear to be playing tag around the periodical shelves.

I'm quite beyond work, and the closing bell will be going soon anyway. So, after checking that they've got something inside them, I grab the books I'm allowed to borrow and head for the main doors. Outside, in the bright warmth of this suddenly rainless evening, preparations for

Midsummer's Eve are starting on the shining kidney-stones of Radcliffe Square. A temporary bandstand, and bunting that has hardly had time to come down since Oak Apple Day, are going up again now that the rain has ceased. Next Monday, four days from now, there'll be children in green frocks and sashes, roast bullock, mummers, gaudy morris dancers and a fair on Merton Fields with swing boats, beer tents and grinning curates joining the jigs now that the Archbishops have blessed these extra pagan celebrations.

The books I've brought with me are a bigger burden than I'd imagined, in part because I'm almost sure that they'll be useless—otherwise, why was I allowed to see them? By the time I get back to college I'm so tired that I feel like the dying man I am. The quad smells rich and earthy. The sodden grass is lurid green. I stumble as I step up into the cloisters, nearly falling headlong.

I gaze at my scattered books, trying to summon the energy to bend to the worn slabs that commemorate the corpses of ancient fellows. By the time I'm ready to do so, Cumbernald, the college principal, has emerged from his office nearby.

"*The Jews Of Germany. The Community Of Lodz And Its Region. Baedeker's Scottish Highlands and Islands, 1934. My Struggle*," he says, scooping up my books with his long brown hands, frowning and inspecting the spines. "Hmmm, I've read that one—man's totally mad. Good job old Kaiser Willy's got him back in clink, eh? Bit far away from the Holy League, though, Brook."

"Believe it or not, I need to keep my mind active," I reply, tired and tetchy as he hands the books back to me.

Cumbernald smiles and raises his arms in mock surrender. The sun, reddening the few remaining clouds as it begins the long process of setting beyond the college tower, gleams on the bald dome of his head. He's a tall man, is Cumbernald. He radiates smooth affluence and efficiency. Some part of me always yearns to thump him.

"Glad I caught you like this, Brook. Been going through next term's curriculum and we need to talk. How about the Fellows' Room—say, fifteen minutes, when you've caught your breath?"

I open my mouth to say something about being tired, pressure of work, the fact that I probably won't be much use to him anyway in the next

academic year on account of my dying. It comes out as a simple, pliant yes.

Having fortified myself with two fat bitter tablets and tumbled down book-lined shafts and through rooms and along corridors that grow big, then small, I'm sitting with Cumbernald in the big wing-back chairs of the Fellows' Room half an hour later. The soot-stained Cotswold fireplace between us is filled with a display of orange-red roses so bright that they seem to give off a warmth.

Cumbernald offers me a Balkan Sobranie from a burr-walnut box decorated with our college arms. *Tarum Per Cornua Prehende.*

"Can't help noticing that you've been looking a touch under the weather, Brook." He lights up, then twirls the stem of his port glass. "Nothing serious, I hope?"

I gaze back at him as I light my own cigarette with its gold tip, its pink paper, its mouldy scent of bazaars, puffing the smoke into my cheeks and blowing it back out, my face reddening as I struggle not to cough. Although I'm eating more than I did before, food has become tasteless. And such is the gap between my belly and my trousers that I've started wearing braces, unfashionable though they are. My ribs are sharp, like coathanger wire. My long face looks narrow and hollow.

"I've been slightly ill. You know how it is—summer cold. Bit of a dickey tummy."

Cumbernald blinks slowly and nods. Oxford's a big city these days—so thank God and John Arthur for the anonymity of the NHS where you can be decently ill without people finding out about you.

"Personally," he says, "I've always thought this place was unhealthy. Too low, too many rivers. Just think what it's been like this week—you should see the college cellars! Totally flooded. Everything gets trapped by the hills, and now there's all this extra traffic. Foul, terrible air…"

"Actually, I quite like it."

"You haven't been at Varsity as long as I have. And you look like someone who needs a break. Me, I'm off to Tuscany straight after Mods. I time-share a villa near Sienna with a professor from the new National Fascist College at Ravenna. Fascinating man—you should hear him on the Battle Of Aegospotami. Knows Mussolini personally."

“I was thinking of going up to the Scottish Highlands,” I say, feeling a brief pang at the thought of warm scented pines, the blaze of sunlit marble; all the people and places I’ll never get to know. “It’s been many years since I was there. I’d like to see how it’s changed.”

“Fresh air! Scotland! Well that sounds… Splendid. Let’s just hope it doesn’t rain. Meanwhile, Brook, what I’ll do is to bypass you…” Cumbernald makes an aeroplane movement with his hand to demonstrate, “in the initial assessment and marking processes when we get the papers in. Later on in the summer, perhaps you could moderate?”

“That would be fine,” I reply, thinking back towards the eye-fizzing task of last year’s marking; and wondering what gaffe I made.

We nod at each other in an excess of agreement. I take a sip of the splendid port and grind out my largely unsmoked Sobranie, depositing a grey worm of ash on the carpet.

“About Michaelmas Term,” Cumbernald continues, shifting on his lean buttocks and re-crossing his legs to reveal a surprisingly brown length of shin. “I was thinking of giving you the Enlightened Despots again. Mind?”

“As you know, it’s my speciality.”

From there, we move our way through other bits of responsibility. How to keep Badman from rattling on about Thermopylae. Whose turn it is to do the weary trudge through the early middle ages. Names of students are exchanged, although I’m not sure if there’s a moment when we both recognise the same person. Like most inferior academics, Cumbernald had pushed his way into administration. Yet he has risen ridiculously far, ridiculously fast. I can’t believe the Oxford of old would have put up with someone so obviously second rate. He welcomes, for a start, people like me. They bolster his own inadequacy.

“Bit of a problem with Roberts, you know,” he says after peeking around the wing of his chair to scan the scattered occupants of the others, who are mostly ancient, draped in the shadows like mouldering coats, to make sure that no one can overhear us. “Evidently he wrote a book back in the twenties about the economics of the Roman Empire. Argued that the colonies were a drain on Rome, rather than supporting it. Big factor in the downfall—you know the kind of thing. Then he keeps going off into the same rubbish about Britain. Even crops up in his students’ essays—

although of course we can't expect the dear things to know any better unless we teach them, can we?"

"I'd be surprised if Robert's book was still available."

"But that's not the point, is it?" Cumbernald lights another Sobranie, and leans forward like a spiv with the cigarette cupped inside his hand, smoke jetting from his thin lips. "Remember Hobson…?" His voice trails down to a whisper at the hint of a discredited name. "And Brooking? Gone, of course. But you know. Move with the times, Brook. History changes…"

The tall glass-cased clock on the plinth behind us begins to whirrr and gasp, almost as if it can't quite bring itself to pronounce that it is now ten o-clock on Thursday the 20th of June in the Year of Our Lord, 1940. The curtains have long been drawn. The porter's men who serve us from antique silver trays wear swallow-tail coats that haven't changed in centuries. Time stands still here; you could walk out into the cloisters and bump into Samuel Johnson, Edmund Halley, John Keats…

"Then there's that whole unfortunate business of the Ford Lecture. The way *I* see it, Brook, it's just silly to argue that King Louis's decision to expel the Huguenots was—what was Robert's phrase?—'quasi-racism'. I'm sure that the only way to look at that whole incident now is to emphasise both the benefit it gave to France by encouraging the growth of the middle classes, *and* also the great good that the influx did to the Lowland countries and Greater Britain…"

Thus we continue through dizzying twists and turns as we re-write what we know of history, marked by the clock's reluctant chimes. When my curriculum seems to be settled at last and some hitherto-unknown part of me is aching for another dose of the bitter fat pills that I've left up in my rooms and my throat is raw from a suppressed cough, Cumbernald leans over and lays a restraining well-manicured hand upon my shoulder as I attempt to get up.

"Oh, and there's one other thing I've been planning, Brook. A little project of mine…" He steeples his hands and smiles. "It's something in which I just had this feeling you'd be keen to assist me."

"I'm sure I am," I mutter, thinking how nice it would be to foul up one of Cumbernald's stupid projects by dying in the middle of it. Last year he arranged for us dons to attend an excruciating series of talks by "ordinary people".

“I don’t think there’s enough of a link been made, Brook, between science and history…”

I nod at that, mannequin that I am. I can’t even be bothered to tell him that he’s plainly got the wrong man. All I know about science is Archimedes’s bath, Pythagoras’s triangle, Newton’s apple.

“So I’m planning to widen the curriculum a bit in that direction. And cross-college, too. Well, I *did* try old Hazlitt here. You can imagine what he was like…”

“I’m sure.”

“So I’ve been on the, ah, blower to Frank Stanyard, and he’s recommended this young don of his. Name of Bracken. One or two things he’s doing are rounding off and apparently he’s absolutely chomping at the bit to get his teeth into something new and involving. Not an Oxford man, either. Did his degree at *Warwick* of all places—didn’t even know they had a university there.”

“It’s one of the newer ones.”

“Still, that’s the Midlands, isn’t it? Where you come from. Common territory. Thought it might help things along.”

“When do you want me to meet him?”

“Soon as poss if you don’t mind. You free tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Fine, fine. I’m told he works mornings in one of those ghastly new buildings along Parks.” Cumbernald smiles at me. “About ten o-clock, eh? I’m sure he’ll be expecting you.”

For the first time this summer, I leave my bedroom window open overnight as I wrestle with sleep. I hear the faint drippings and stirrings of the oak in the quad, the call of an owl. I hear the tick of a bicycle, whisperings and footsteps, a car’s engine, the clattering hooves of a cart. I hear a woman’s voice crying faintly and rhythmically in either pain or love, and the steam whistle of a night train. And beyond that, beyond my own breath and my heart’s agitated beating—beyond everything—there comes a dull, persistent roaring as of the churning of a vast engine, the breaking of a grey, unmeasurable sea.

5

CHRISTLOW SERVES ME A breakfast of scrambled eggs, black pudding, Oxford Dainties, fried bread, grilled tomato and bacon ("Looks like you need perking up, sir…") which I scoff greedily from their lake of fat. Then I take a long soak in one of the white-tiled bathrooms at the end of the corridor. Finally, dressed, fortified with tablets, I walk along Broad in bright morning sunshine towards my meeting with this Bracken person.

The new science blocks along South Parks Road are still surrounded by the rutted clay of a building site. For once, I can only agree with Cumbernald. They *are* ugly; all squat towers, thick walls, defensive-looking windows, like fairy castles that have been sat on by a giant. I find Bracken by enquiring at the first major entrance I come to. Gawking at the sculpted knights and maidens as I wait for him to respond to a telephoned summons, I see that at last my time has come; the carved ribbons of inscription around the skylight roof—Dickens, Ruskin, Morris, John Arthur, lots of Shakespeare—are no longer in Latin.

Bracken arrives wearing a tattered jacket and a name badge. "They've got this thing about security here," he mutters as he leads me along brightly-lit parquet-patterned corridors. With his broad body, straw-like hair, eyes that don't really look at you, his faint smell of sulphur, he's nothing like the dons I'm used to.

In his office, as we fence around the subject of what exactly we're supposed to be doing together, I look for signs of his political loyalties. Not that anyone *isn't* Modernist now, but still there are degrees. Little things that would have meant nothing a few years ago have acquired an almost magical significance. Too many volumes of Ruskin or Shakespeare in the bookcase (especially if they look new and little-read). The collected works of Sir Walter Scott (invariably pristine). Cups and medals, odd-looking diplomas, a breezy over-emphasis on outdoor pursuits, large group photographs of grinning adults. All signify the need for caution.

But the evidence here is harder to decipher. Bracken's office is awash with heaped and be-ribboned exam sheets, piled textbooks with eye-stinging titles, unwashed crockery. And beneath that hair, Bracken is

younger than he looks. He smells, I decide, simply of matches and grass; neutral out-of-doorsy smells. In another age, he'd have made a fine shepherd.

After we've acknowledged that we know little and care even less about each other's subjects, we drink coffee in the deserted canteen, talking easily in that careless way that strangers sometimes have. As a fig-leaf to cover Cumbernald's demands, we agree to say we're working on something based on Pope Urban VIII's dispute with Galileo. And I comment on how quiet it seems here: all these new buildings, all these rooms and floors, so few dons or students…

"Everything's under-subscribed," Bracken sighs. "If you get good School Highers in physics, you'd do a lot better going straight into the Army, or even the KSG. All that happens after you pass your degree here is that you're conscripted. Then you're stuck in the same secret institutions, and up against people who've been there all along."

"That didn't happen to you?"

"I served my two years. After that, I simply wanted out…" His voice trails off. "Anyway, as you're here, I may as well show you some of what my work's about."

I'm treated to swirling displays of prettily coloured gases, the mad dancing of broken-looking pendulums, photographs of rain clouds, rolling trays of balls, as Bracken demonstrates a phenomenon called *sensitive dependence on initial conditions.* "You see…" he says, standing back as a tap splutters. "This is called turbulent behaviour. The actions of the individual water molecules are no longer predictable, no longer smooth and controlled. The slightest change—the slightest disturbance…" He tweaks a valve and the flow smoothes. "It becomes what we call laminar again. Turbulent, not turbulent—a vast difference, mathematically and physically. Yet all it takes is the minutest change."

Bracken's slow voice, his big hands, his deliberate manner, are impossibly soothing. I can't help but warm to him, and his work on randomness and unpredictability seems like almost the opposite of science; something I can understand from my own study of the increasing wildness of history. Perhaps, the thought creeps in just as always it does when I meet someone male and less than repulsive, he, too, might be…? When he suggests that we go back to his house for lunch, I accept.

We take a green Oxford City bus from New Street to Marston—the older village rather than the newer suburb that's going up nearby amid clouds of cement dust. Walking past St Nicholas's church and quiet Cotswold stone, we reach Bracken's pretty low-roofed cottage. The garden is filled with poppies, sweet peas, soaring red hot pokers and lupins.

"I'm home!" he surprises me by calling out when he opens the front door on its latch. A feminine murmur of reply rises from the kitchen.

"This is my sister Ursula," Bracken says to my slight and shameful relief as a young woman, dark haired and pony-tailed, smoothes her pinafore and smiles in greeting.

"I'm sure there's enough mince in the oven," Ursula says as she shakes my hand with her own, which is cool, firm, freckled. "I just *wish* Walter would tell me…"

Over plates of what would once have been called Irish stew, Bracken remains silent as his big, scientific hands dissect the somewhat gristly meat whilst his sister tells me about her opposition to the proposed new Oxford Bypass.

"They're so lethargic here," she says. "If nobody does anything, nothing will ever happen. The whole countryside's being ruined…"

"You must be very determined," I say, "to think that you can change things."

"Oh, I'm sure I *won't*. There'll be the public enquiry, then they'll start building it this autumn. The word is that they've already let the contract. But you have to make the effort," she says gravely, fixing me with her steady brown eyes. "You have to do that, don't you? I mean, that's what I'm always telling Walter…"

Our lunch digested, Walter Bracken guides me through the bean poles and cabbages in the back garden to show me the long building that runs across the cottage's rear. It's vine-encrusted, made of rusted corrugated iron, is about the width of a car garage, but much longer.

Inside, as Bracken hefts open the padlock and clicks on the bare lights, I discover a long windowless space, caged off along one side. It smells more strongly of the scent I've already noticed on him. Salty, hayey; bitter and sharp. It's hot in here. I brush the cobwebs off a stool to sit down as, after throwing switches that cause the place to buzz like a faintly aching tooth, Bracken opens a tall cream-enamelled cabinet at the far end that

looks like a butcher's fridge and does, in fact, contain several halves of pig carcass. He lifts one out and hooks it inside the cage. Painted blue to signify it's been condemned by the Health Inspector, it gives off a sour, rubbery smell.

He then unlocks a big metal-banded chest containing a large armoury of pistols and rifles. I'm half expecting him to toss one out to me in the manner of Randolph Scott when the farmstead is surrounded—*"You can handle a shooter, can't you? Don't matter now who's Marshall"*—but instead he places a large pistol into a vice within the cage pointing down at the blue pig.

Fiddling with screwdrivers as he loads the gun and sets the sights, Bracken recounts how the project he's working on here was started by a don who nursed his son to a slow death after being wounded at the Somme. The experience made him decide to develop something called Humane Bullet—which is the projectile most certain to kill its target instantly. To me, it all sounds like another apocryphal Oxford story.

"The Government took it over in the twenties," Bracken says. "They've been giving a grant ever since… Here," he dangles me a grubby pair of ear mufflers, then steps back and pulls a wire.

Blam. The gun explodes, and the blue pig quivers through the smoke as various teletype machines begin to chatter to themselves like the crowd at Wimbledon after a rally. There's small hole in the flesh beneath the ribs: the far side of this new orifice, as Bracken wanders down the cage and twists the carcass around to measure and inspect it, is a gouged-out mess of flesh, bone, gristle.

The Humane Bullet, he explains in this oddly intimate moment as the strangely appetising waft of half-cooked spoiled pork reaches me, is the meeting of a vast number of variables: there's the size of the bullet itself, and the weapon from which it is to be fired, then the distance it will cross, the level of accuracy required, velocity, the alloy from which it is made, the type of jacket, aerodynamics, the chemistry of the charge, the clothing and body-mass of the target…The basic trick, though, is to make a hole in the tip of the bullet so that it spreads out on impact with flesh, transferring more of the energy. The Humane Bullet, put simply, is a sophisticated version of the dum-dum.

“The man from the knacker’s yard comes round Thursday evenings,” he adds as he works with a mop and bucket to clear up the scattered bits of meat. “Most of the carcass ends up as candles and glue…”

“Don’t you worry?” I ask.

Walter Bracken pauses, hands clasped on the top of his mop, head bowed, as if he hasn’t quite heard the question.

“I mean, about the use this will be put to.”

“If I wasn’t doing this,” he says, beginning to push the mop again, “it would be something else. There’s a project in Australia the War Office is pestering me to go to. Some part of the Western Desert that doesn’t even have a name. Very hush hush, and I’ve been using the Humane Bullet, I suppose, as a way of keeping them off my back. Unfortunately, though, the work out there is somewhat related to this…”

I gaze around the shed. “Australia seems a long way from here.”

“But it also has to do with the behaviour of materials under extreme compression,” he murmurs. “And turbulence, shock waves, even bullets, strangely enough…” Some time after that, the phrases lost in an internal train of thought and the clank and swish of his mop and bucket, Bracken’s voice dies. Then *blam* a while later as another dead pig bites the dust. He seems to have forgotten about me by then, and I’m feeling sleepy in the shed’s strange foggy warmth with the patter of sparrow’s feet on the roof interrupted now and then by the sour hammer of destruction.

When I finally drag my chin from my chest, I hear tinkling, and see that Bracken’s busy sweeping up the cartridge cases with a dustpan and broom. I’m forced out into the air as I begin to cough.

“I don’t know how many hours Walter spends down there,” Ursula says as we stand outside the kitchen window, gazing down the gravel path. “I’m surprised the neighbours don’t complain. But of course they’re used to it.” She folds her arms and gives a little shiver. “That’s why I came down here, really. To keep an eye on him.”

“Where do you live?”

“I suppose you can say here at the moment.” She shrugs. “Walter’s doing me the favour by letting me stay in this house. But since our father died, I’m not sure that I can fit in anywhere.”

“Oxford’s as good a place as any to not fit in,” I say. “At least, that’s what I’ve found.”

“Hmmm…” She nods, jutting her chin out nervously. “Anyway Geoffrey—can I call you Geoffrey?—Geoffrey, this work you and Walter are busy on—”

“—I’d hardly call it work—”

“—Whatever it is. I think he’s quite lonely down at the college. And here, with me. I’m not sure if I know how to say this, but will you keep an eye on him? Try to be—oh, I know this sounds silly—his friend?”

I meet her gaze. “I’ll do my best.”

She smiles up at me. “Anyway, I expect you’ll want to be getting back…”

So I say goodbye to them both, fiddling with the latch as we stand cramped in the little hall and Bracken runs his bitten fingernails around the edges of a letter that’s arrived, marked Recorded Delivery, with the afternoon’s post. The envelope’s brown, but plush. Crested. Perfectly typed. OHMS.

They watch me from the doorway, brother and sister, as I head off down the path. I give them a cheery wave. It’s a late afternoon in this suddenly perfect English summer, far too beautiful to waste standing waiting for a bus. As I set off down warm country lanes sleepy with birdsong and the drone of insects, and as the towers of Oxford drift closer over the haze of the parklands and the river, I’m sure I can still hear a gun firing repeatedly in the distance.

6

NEXT MORNING—A FRIDAY, Midsummer's Eve—I busy myself with a couple of the meetings I'm expected to attend by virtue of various obscure elections and nominations. Then, after a swift lunch of salmon and roast beef from the cold table in the West Room, I finally get around to sorting out the arrangements for my long-planned Scottish holiday. I queue first at the GWR Station for the tickets, then again at the City Post Office for all the stamps, clearances and cross-county passes that must go with them. The woman behind the counter eyes me through the spittle-frosted glass before she stamps my documents and slides them back to me. Perhaps she remembers my pestering her with queries about letters to my imagined aunt in Canada. I find myself wondering if she misses my acquaintance, and who emptied his desk upstairs in the Censor's Office, who scratched his name off the tea club…

Outside, Oxford smells dizzily of the sour gas of its overstretched drains on this warm late afternoon, and is busier than ever with people up from London, people in from the suburbs, people down from the country. Everything about the city seems hectic and overstuffed today. The wares of the shops are tumbling out into the street, the pubs are bustling, pigeons are pecking at pools of sick, there's a queue for pink-iced "Midsummer's Eve Cakes" outside Boffins Bakery at Carfax, and everywhere there are too many cars.

I pause for a pint of Hall's Gold Medal as I pass the Bear. The back bar, which used to resound to the click of dominoes and the splat of spittle on sawdust, has been carpeted and is filled with the shrieking of female voices. "We're getting tiddled," one of them explains. I sup my beer and knock back a couple of tablets, sitting close enough to the juke-box to listen to the songs I've put my penny in for over this jolly racket. *April Showers. Mad About The Boy. Waiting For Nowhere*… But today, their easy sentiment is lost on me. People meet, they fall in love, they marry, they have children: then their lives are wrenched apart because of some accident of birth or history. They disappear, and no one even seems to notice. Even I —I just sit here and drink my beer and nurse my pains and my self-pity

when I should be standing on the table and yelling. What, I wonder, has happened to the world? Events used to go so predictably. Britain makes a treaty with Germany; France makes one with Spain. Portugal secures independence from Castile; Henry the Navigator pushes down to explore the coast of North Africa; envious Spain joins in; soon, the world is circumnavigated, America discovered. Cause and effect. But now, history consists of random twists and turns. A tiny earthquake in Bogota causes a gas leak in Ealing. The assassination of an Archduke in some obscure Balkan city brings about a World War.

The music ends and I stumble outside. The air feels stuffy this evening as my heart starts to pound and cold needles stab at my chest and hands. I shake out a third dose of tablets from my bakelite box and swallow them dry. When a 159 bus slows and stops beside me along New Road, I climb aboard it on impulse, drawn by its purposeful thrum, the stale scent of cigarette smoke and summer bodies, the fact that it will take me to somewhere that isn't Oxford.

I share my journey down the Eynsham Road on this Midsummer's Eve with two middle-aged chain-smoking Spanish tourists. They squeak and point at this and that from their seats on the top deck; fairy candles glowing from windows, sprigs of rowan over doors, the start of Midsummer bonfires in the parks, lamp-lit picnics, children sleeping out in tents in their front gardens. A Bus Inspector gets on at Botley and comes wandering along the aisles with a swaying sailor's gate, asking to see passes and identity cards, enquiring about the purpose of our journeys: an old English custom that the Spaniards greet with excitement, although I'm sure it's much the same for them at home under Franco. I tell him that I'm simply passing the time, and feel absurdly grateful when he nods and moves on.

By Adderly, the bus is empty and I head into evening across the village green through rolls of bonfire smoke. A promising-looking path of trodden grass runs across a field where the cattle stare at me in amazement, then come chuffing up with their long eager faces, their wet noses. I clamber over a barbed-wire topped gate where a wooden footpath sign points through a high expanse of thistles. Scratched, lost, tired, I finally reach a brick wall at the end of an alarmingly dark wood, pushing through ferns and foxgloves until I come to a door, once green, dotted with medieval-looking iron studs. When I give the iron handle a shove, the door creaks open.

Beyond, there is a wide lawn—more of a parkland, really—mottled with horse chestnuts that have had their undersides neatly nibbled flat by deer. A long redbrick house with many tall spiral chimneys glows orange in the sunset beside the long shadows of marquees, deckchairs, awnings. A scatter of croquet players look up from their game and give me a cheery wave.

I find a deckchair and sit down to catch my breath as white doves clatter over the topiary yews and gathering rows of Rovers, Jaguars, Bristols, and perky little MGs with their windscreens down, sweep in around the house's moat of gravel, threading headlights into a golden mesh as men and women emerge fresh-minted in their evening clothes and the sky turns an ever-deeper blue. Lanterns are set out by the dark-suited servants and their flames flash in the windows and lick the twirl of limbs as sleeves are rolled up, ties discarded, music pulses and the people begin to dance. A knife of pain digs into my left shoulder. Nobody seems surprised to see me here. I take another tablet.

A girl with the kohled eyes of an Egyptian priestess twirls in front of me bearing a tray of half-risen cakes, on which the words EAT ME have been picked out in raisins. I grab one and take a bite, then another, wondering if I'm going to grow big or small as she skips off, giggling. The music wafting from loudspeakers in the trees is Glen Miller, Duke Ellington. Slick, sophisticated; decadent white-nigger American. A solo clarinet sounds over creamy pillows of trombone and sax, almost too beautiful for words. Me and cheap music.

Stumbling up from my deckchair, my mouth so dry and swollen now that I can barely swallow my next tablet, I grab a passing glass of fizzy English wine and tip it back. Hands brush against me, sequinned handbags flutter and cigarette holders jostle like lances as crimson lips smile in surprise and press close to mine. Here, we are all friends, acquaintances. I slump on a wall beside a lake where a rowing boat floats upturned amid the quivering stars. Time passes as water laps and the trees about me fizz and whisper, speckled with lanterns, stars, all the twinkling fey wonders of this Midsummer Eve.

Wondering about my prospects of getting back to Oxford, I try to focus on my watch. But there's no one about as I ramble up to the side of the house where ivy looms dark in the moon's shadow against the high walls

and air heavy with the perfume of sea lavender carries the thump of distant music, the crash of broken glass, moans of passion, shrieks of laughter.

I walk across the soft lawns where a few crinkled white balloons float like weary ghosts of Midsummer's past and a stone lion squats, its mouth smeared with either blood or lipstick. A fox darts between the long hedges, and he and I stare at each other for a moment before we go on about the strange business of our separate lives. The road beyond the house's open gates is grey, a river of mist, and the sky, which never truly darkened, is brightening already as I walk between long lines of cob-web silvered elms which might lead back towards Oxford.

Soon, all the scents and sounds of morning start to rise, but still I have glance back to the deeper darkness that hangs somewhere along the glimmering road behind me. Once, I even stop and call out, sensing a figure, a shape. In fact, I almost urge it to come.

7

LOADED WITH SHOPPERS, BICYCLES, dogs, and hung-over students going down, the early-evening local train calls at every imaginable halt between Oxford and Rugby. There are stations beside canal bridges. Stations in farmyards. Stations piled with milk churns and mail bags in the middle of pretty nowhere. And posters, posters. Posters of the seaside and posters of the country. Posters of towns. THE LAKE DISTRICT FOR REST AND QUIET IMAGININGS. TAKE THE SUNDAY SPECIAL AND VISIT LAMBOURN DOWNS, where a smiling family are picnicking on a swathe of green as coloured kites dance against a cloudless sky.

Then finally Rugby, where I change platforms and sit on the edge of a handcart until, gun-blue, its streamlined snout oozing steam and the sense of far-away before flashing endless carriages, the *Sir Galahad* overnight Euston-to-Glasgow pulls in. A porter helps me struggle with my old suitcase as the Tannoy barks incomprehensibly. I find my reserved seat—First Class; *G Brooke* in copper-plate. This, I tell myself as I settle back and the whole station starts to slide by, must be a good omen. To have back, with all these other memories, my original name.

It's still early. We are still far south. The less seasoned travellers in this carriage cross and uncross their legs, press fingers to their mouths, pick at the white lace that covers their armrests. I recognise two probable civil servants, a likely academic, the doddery Lord of some Scottish estate, a honeymoon couple—and another couple who pay such little attention to each other that their journey has to be sweetly illicit. At the carriage's far corner, in an arbour so bedecked with roses that there was hardly a need to mark it Reserved, sit four senior officers of the KSG, the Knights Of Saint George. They steeple their well-manicured hands and talk in low voices. The fact of their power is so strong that it is hard to take in the specific details of their appearance, that one is red-haired and young, that another is bald and sports a moustache. They all somehow just look sleek, plump—seals basking on a sunny shore, washed by the warm waves of the future.

They order first for dinner whilst tablecloths are laid in the dining car next door, and I notice as we clatter over points how the other passengers

strain to hear what they have selected from the menu so that they can choose the same themselves. We flash through Bedworth, Nuneaton towards the whole grey mess of eastern Birmingham and then on into the cattle-gazing anonymity of the Midlands countryside.

After sherry, we move cars and sit down to face cutlery that lies clean as a surgeon's implements. I flap out my napkin—the roaring embroidered GWR loin now holds a Modernist cross in its paws—and I smile at the man opposite me. We have nothing left to say once we have commented on the lovely weather. This, after all, is still Britain. In many ways, little has changed since Francis Eveleigh and I went to Scotland nearly thirty years ago.

I dip my spoon into the gently slopping asparagus soup and break open a bread roll. I smoke a cigarette between courses. We pause at Crewe. The pork is excellent, the roast potatoes are crisp little envelopes of warmth. Even my sense of taste seems to have come back to me. No ash, no dead leaves, and the strawberries for pudding taste exactly like strawberries, the clotted Devon cream is just like clotted Devon cream. Feeling faintly sick, faintly elated, I finish my coffee and Glenlivet as Manchester becomes Bolton and then Preston without any obvious change. I smile to my companion and sway past the tables. Letting down the strap and leaning out of a window between carriages, I can see the train stretching far ahead of me along the bends. The towns become grimmer for a while as the hills grow wilder, before suddenly transforming into pale stone and whitewash where packhorse bridges straddle silver streams in the prickling fairy dust of evening. The waiter taps my shoulder, asking if I would like another Glenlivet. He has it ready on the tray he's holding, along with iced water in a GWR jug, individually-wrapped GWR chocolate, a GWR matchbox, a choice of GWR cigarettes.

All of this, by my standards, is a wild extravagance. Despite all of John Arthur's promises, going First Class has not become any cheaper. But, with the decent salary I'm paid, the easy frugality of college life, the money I have put away from the sale of my mother's house—and the fact that this will be the last holiday I ever take—I can easily afford it.

At ten, passing through the suburbs of Lancaster, I make my way along the gently rocking corridors towards the sleeping carriage. My name is on the door; *G. Brooke.* Another luxury this, to have booked both the upper

and lower bunks in a compartment. To have had some stranger above me—even a First Class one—the breathing weight of him sagging down over my memories, would have been unbearable. We went Second Class all those years ago, did Francis and I, and I wonder as I slide my door shut and run my hands along the brass fittings, the polished marquetry, if these differences will break the precious burden of renewed love that I feel myself carrying. Yet enough is the same—from the bleached smell of the towels, the dire warnings about pulling the communication cord, the whole muffled weight of this hurrying train…

Of course, my money paid for our trip; Francis never had enough of his own. At the time we set out on our holiday together, everything was still a matter of friendship. Not that I didn't I love him, adore him for his looks, his mind. But this was in 1914, and I was 34 by then already, and Francis was just 19. The whole idea of physical love, cheap sham that I was sure it was, made the thought of such contact unbearable.

Francis, after all, had many female friends back in his left wing set in Lichfield. And they, being no more blind to him than I was, gathered around him after meetings in cooing groups. The talk then was of libertarianism, Nijinsky, Stravinsky, Futurism, Lawrence and Proust… Even in Lichfield, and with me elevated by then to the giddy heights of Assistant Junior Master at Friary School and a house-owner by inheritance, everything was supposed to be *modern*—although there was no capital M to the word then. Watching his group from outside like some explorer encountering a new tribe, I had no idea what most of it meant. Francis seemed to have no special association with any of these women, and he always left the meetings that I found myself attending in the back rooms of pubs and hotels (as the church halls wouldn't have us) alone. But it was hard to believe, amid all the talk, that he wasn't privately stroking the breasts and limbs of those lovely creatures.

It was an odd situation, to begin with, that I found myself in. I had never had much interest in current affairs. Now that I was at a respectable school, teaching virtually nothing but proper history, I had allowed almost every other interest in life to drop away. But I still entertained thoughts of writing my book. And, then as now, the task proved easier in the imagining than it did in reality. After many botched attempts, I began to wonder if something else was missing. History, after all, is ever-changing. It must

always be viewed from the perspective of the present. And what did I know, in my dusty home, with my bookish celibacy, of such a thing?

I decided to widen my horizons. Cycling, golf, the Doctor Johnson Society, the Town Hall Chess Club—all of these I tried. I even went through a dogged period of walking up the street each evening to share the supposedly convivial warmth of the Bald Buck up by the Tamworth crossroads. But none of this held any real interest for me; and the sudden chilling of atmosphere in the snug each time I set foot in it made me begin to wonder if I truly wasn't odd—queer, even—in a way that people instantly noticed.

So I settled instead for something that I would never have done if I had still been under the wing of my avowedly Tory mother. I joined the local Fabian Society. I was still as neutral in politics as I imagined myself to have become sexually, yet in my efforts to take myself seriously as a historian, I decided that politics probably lay at the cutting edge of current affairs—and that, if one was to become involved instead of being a mere spectator, it was necessary to back a particular horse. Quite laughably as events turned out, I decided to go with the socialist left.

It was probably a good job that I dipped my toe into the waters of political debate without any high ideals. In the face of batty majors' wives, social inadequates, gritty rock cakes at ghastly tea mornings, badly-organised day trips, mumbled speeches and endless back-biting, they would soon have been banished. Still, I can see with hindsight that it was an interesting time for British left wing politics—one at which it busily sowing the seeds of its own annihilation.

The younger and generally rowdier element (of which Francis was undoubtedly a member) were busily undermining the cosy nineteenth century libertarianism of William Morris—the Morris, that is, who existed before he was re-invented by Modernism. Francis and his crowd only hung around the fringes of the Fabians so that they could recruit disaffected members for their own newer organisations such as the SDF and the ILP. They believed in strikes, direct action, in attempting to persuade the trades unions, who could generally be bothered only with furthering their own narrow interests, to become openly political. A night in the cells was regarded as a badge of honour, and people who could claim to have helped

in the miners strike at Tonypandy, even if they were almost certainly liars, were regarded as secular saints.

It was all naively innocent. Francis worked six days a week behind the counter of the John Menzies bookstall at Lichfield station, lived in digs, lifted his little finger when he drank tea, was secretive about his background, and spoke with a suspiciously upper-class accent. The closest he came to the working classes was in his insistence in drinking at the Scales on Market Street—a tanners pub—where the coolness of his welcome made mine at the Bald Buck seem positively effulgent. But at least he had dreams of a better world. His failing, and that of the left wing as a whole, was that he loved to argue, and hated to think that he was in the majority about anything. The only political fight I ever saw break out was between the chairman and the secretary of the same organisation.

Still, I was drawn to Francis and his ilk. I liked their youth, their enthusiasm and, frankly, their good looks. They, in turn, treated me, at 34, as a kind of elder statesman. They deferred to my views, they sought my wisdom on what they saw as the historical perspective. For a few fine months, I could pretend that I was both young and old at the same time.

Francis and I began meeting occasionally after he had finished work at the station bookshop. We would take quiet walks. We would choose neutral ground. There was, when he and I were alone, a lot less of the usual posturing. But soon, the prospect of a war in Europe began to dominate our conversation. Francis, although supposedly a pacifist, was fascinated by the idea of conflict. He was young, after all; defiantly combative. He probably thought that a war was his best chance of becoming one of the common people. He even saw it as the touch-paper for revolution. But I think that the truth is more straightforward. Francis, like so many other young men of his generation, was simply spoiling for a fight.

In a white shirt, his collar loose, he would walk ahead of me as we wandered at evening along misty canal towpaths and across muddy spring fields. His eyes were large and deep and blue. His lips were full. His thick black eyebrows almost met in the middle. His body was slight and bony, yet filled with energy. He grew his hair a little longer than was then fashionable, and I loved to watch, as he walked ahead of me, the soft nest of curls that tapered towards the back of his neck.

“You understand, Griff,” he said to me once as we stood to catch our breath amid the cows beneath a dripping tree. “I can work these things out when we walk together.”

My heart ached. I could only smile back at him.

The idea of our cycling trip to Scotland seemed to evolve naturally, gradually. That was probably a good thing, for if I had planned that Francis and I could be on our own, sharing thoughts, ideas and boarding house rooms for a whole fortnight, I am sure that love and terror would have prevented it from ever happening. But somehow, I found that we were checking maps and timetables on the basis of a vague hypothesis and an agreed love of discussion and exploring the countryside—playing with the whole idea, really—until suddenly we were talking proper dates and actual bookings and the thing had miraculously come about. And I was to pay. That, too, slipped easily under the yawning bridge of my uncertainties. Francis, bless him, probably had a far clearer idea of where he was leading me, and what was to come. But for all of that, for absolutely everything about him, I am eternally grateful.

Whatever sexual fantasies that I might have entertained about Francis were easily subsumed in the actual and amazing fact of our holiday—the first proper one that I had undertaken as an adult. I stared wistfully at my books and clothes as I packed them into my old suitcase, knowing already the treasures of memory and closeness they would soon become. Thank God, the idea of two men travelling together on holiday raised few suspicions in 1914.

We ate a meal in the dining carriage as the train pulled out of Birmingham in the rain, studying guide books and maps. The rain stopped somewhere around Stafford and the evening had become glorious by the time we changed for the overnight sleeper at Crewe. Yet we went to bed quite early, I recall, filled with that soothed, tired feeling that only a long railway journey brings.

In our narrow compartment, I tried to busy myself unselfconsciously with the contents of my suitcase on the lower bunk as Francis, chattering as he always chattered, began to undress beside me. Fully naked and with the curtains still open, his body looked both thinner and broader than I had imagined. Such was the arrangement of the mirrors that I got a vivid

glimpse in this plain but shifting light of his balls and penis as, still talking about God knows what, he stepped into his pyjamas.

Trembling, alone in the compartment as Francis headed up the corridor to wash, I drew the curtains across the window and changed rapidly myself, ripping a hole in the arm of my pyjamas in the process. I felt weak and sick and angry. Looking down at the half-erection that, absurdly, was still trying to nudge its way out of my night-clothes, I cursed myself for my stupidity in ever falling for the idea of this holiday.

Francis eventually returned, his hair wet, smelling of Colgate's Tooth Powder and Wright's Coal Tar soap, his eyes glistening. I mumbled something with my back towards him, and shoved my way past.

I took my time at the sinks and in the toilet. On the way back, I pulled down a window and watched the fields burn with sunset as the telegraph wires rose and fell, rose and fell. Steam billowed past me, trailing into the thickening dusk as I breathed in the salt-and-country air. By the time I finally returned to the compartment, the flashing landscape had become a grainy patchwork; the glimmer of a lake; the clustered lights of villages; stars over dark hillsides; a rising moon. Francis was up in the top bunk with the light on, reading *News From Nowhere.* Muttering about how tired I felt, I climbed in below.

I stared up at the shape his body made against the bars of the bunk through the mattress. It truly was both soothing and odd, this motion of the carriage, the steel clatter of the wheels. Eventually, when Francis turned off his light and wished me goodnight, I felt ready for sleep.

Darkness. Motion. The whoosh of another train. Lights; the shape of the carriage window shifting quickly left to right across the curtains. *Clatter, tee tee* as we cross points. When, about half an hour later, Francis began to shift down from his bunk, I simply imagined that he was heading off on a final trip to the toilets. Instead, he climbed into the tiny bunk beside me.

His pyjamas shirt was already undone and he smelled of its cleanness, and faintly of the soap and the toothpowder, and beneath that of the warmth of this own flesh, like burnt lemon. "This is what you want, Griff, isn't it…?" he said. Then he put his arms around me. He kissed me, and nothing else was ever the same.

Clatter, tee, tee… Then as now, the onward rush of the train. That sense of the wild summer night passing. On these tracks, it must have happened. Almost on these very rails. Lying prone on this mattress with the dim shape of the empty bunk looming above me, held in a space that, even in this luxurious carriage of the future, I can easily span with both hands, I wonder how we ever managed to lie together, let alone perform the acts of love. But we did. We did. I am sure of that. As we crossed the Scottish Border, Francis and I entered a new world.

8

CHANGE AT GLASGOW. THERE are new authorisations to be collected in the fresh early morning, and the buildings look much cleaner than I remember them as I pass the time along Sauchiehall Street. The policemen wear tartan sashes. Guttural snatches of Gaelic and lowland Scots have appeared in shop windows and road signs. There's haggis and Angus beef at the meat market, fresh trout and salmon in the fishmongers, whilst the bookshops contain nothing but Scott, Stevenson, Crompton Mackenzie, Burns. Some arcane ceremony is being rehearsed in Renfrew Square to the skirl of bagpipes, the clang of scaffolding.

The Post Office on Union Street opens at nine. By quarter to ten, my freshly-stamped papers are in order, and my journey and its purpose have been approved by a charming dark-haired lass who inhabits a small office behind the stamp machines. SEE BRITAIN BY TRAIN, says the poster above her—a stylised painting of Arthur's Seat like stained glass caught in the sun—FOR A DAY'S OUTING OR A LONGER JOURNEY.

Needing to top up my early breakfast on the train of Arbroath Smokies and clayey white bread, I head back towards the tearoom at Central Station, relaxed and purposeful as I swallow only my second tablet of the day and study the somewhat distant coverage *The Scotsman* chooses to give the start of the Olympics at Wembley. Over a second pot of tea and a dry currant bun, I spread out my old maps and new passes, planning the best and least dangerous way to explore my past, whilst finding at the same time what might have happened to a part-Jewish family.

Francis leans over beside me.

We could go here, Griff, or here. His finger is tracing contour marks, jagged intersections of sea and land. *What a lovely name. I'm sure we could manage that in a day…*

Scenery rears up around me as I travel north. Ben Nevis's peak shines with snow. Startled deer run up hillsides towards dark new plantations of spruce and fir. A mother tells her daughter about Robert the Bruce and his famous spider as we share a couch in the curved glass observation carriage and the white Highland sun pours over their blonde hair. Falling into conversation, I

tell them the stories I have picked up over the years about the wanderings of Bonnie Prince Charlie. Then, just as everyone else seems to have done over the centuries, I make up a few more of my own.

They are both exceptionally beautiful, this mother and child. Their blue grey eyes rest on me, promising forgiveness and understanding. The little girl's father, a Black Watch Major who's risen through the ranks on merit in the way that people only can in real conflicts, is on active service on the ever-troublesome India-Afghanistan border. The mother tells me she sleeps with his and John Arthur's photographs under her pillow. I smile as their faces shine back at me and wish them a good holiday, all the luck in the world.

I spend my first truly Scottish night at Oban, which is just as it was when Francis and I were here, barring the new school and the new bus station. Here, everything always was neat and clean. The woman in the B&B along Shore Road is so wrinkled that I can't tell if she's the same creature who saw to Francis and me all those years ago. Of course, we took little enough notice of her then; our newfound love was just too strong. But these, I finally decide as I inspect my room, probably are the same curtains, the same wallpaper, the same boingey mattress. Everything is so salt-and-sunlight faded that it could have been here forever. But it was no great night of passion for us here at Oban, any more than were many of our other nights at these places. Showing a wisdom far beyond his years in these matters that I found both re-assuring and disturbing, Francis had warned me about keyholes, peepholes, boarding house fingers inspecting the morning's crumpled sheets. Even then, the penalty for sexual acts between consenting males was ten years imprisonment—more, seeing that Francis was still strictly a minor. *There'll be other places*, he said, laughing and then briefly kissing me when he saw my face. *Look at that scenery—go on, Griff* (his hands on my shoulders, his breath on my face, the miracle, still, of his touching me)—*look out of the* w*indow. It's all ours!*

The train carries me next towards Ballachulish and the end of the Caledonian Line. The track here runs beside sea and mountains between cloud-chasing shadows and glorious sunlight. The conscripts I share my carriage with have flat Lancashire accents and are heart-breakingly young. A fresh pain rumbles in my body as I talk to them about Oxford *(where's*

that, then, mate, near London?) whilst the sea flashes and sparkles outside. They seem to care about nothing but the state of the local NAAFI and the ever-changing moods of their sergeant. They call John Arthur The Old Man; a God-like figure to be admired, feared, obeyed. This scenery, the circumstances of their being up here on some fucking exercise or other—the very fact of their lives. It all passes them by.

Ballachulish always was a nothing-place, greyed with slate quarries and mountainous spoil heaps. We laughed about it, then, did Francis and I; too happy to believe in bad omens. Nowadays, motor traffic rumbles along the main road beside the shore, raising quarry dust on the wind as Bristols and Ladybirds, great tank transporters, troop trucks and green-tarpaulined wagons bearing the ponderous shapes of field guns blunder past through a twilight of their own making. They all seem to be heading south.

The proprietor of the White Forge Garage where Francis and I once hired our bicycles wipes his hands and stares at my papers in his grubby office, squints at me, then stares down at my papers again. I'm certain they're all in order, with this year's blue identity card, the initial Oxford authorisations for my journey and the travelling-on-through stamps, sub-passes and clipped-on appendices.

"We don't get many come to hire a car."

"But you *do* have one? It *was* arranged…"

He shrugs. He has a thick body, a thick face. A small tuft of hair is growing on the end of his nose. Mae West, faded and ancient, smiles down at us from a poster for *Blue Angel* as I wait for him to rummage in a filing cabinet for the extra scraps of paper he must add to my collection. His skin is rough and pale—he looks like a fisherman deprived of the light—and it's clear that he doesn't care much for me with my lowland clothes, my fancy passes, my Sassenach accent. In a nation filled with over-caution, over-courtesy, the sideways look over the shoulder before anything is implied, I find his frank antagonism reassuring.

"You know," I say, clearing gritty mucus from my throat, "I always wondered what happened to the people who were sent up here."

"Up *here*?" He turns to me.

"I remember the newspapers about—oh, five years back. They always used to speak of the North West Highlands when they mentioned the Jews. I mean, their relocation."

His eyes narrow at the word Jews. He shifts his stance bullishly. “The *North* West Highlands, you say? Here at Ballachulish, we’re still what you call the South West. The North West Highlands, they don’t really start until you get up to Fort William at least. Past the Great Glen.”

The correct papers finally found, the necessary rubber stamps extracted from a rattling heap in a desk drawer and supplemented by inky blue fingerprints, I’m shown to my car. I’d expected some characterful wreck, but it turns out to have made the journey up from Oxford, just like me. It’s a black Morris Ladybird, the people’s car.

I sit hunched on the cramped seat as the engine throbs, holding the wheel and trying to affect a familiarity that my few lessons five years before hardly justify, whilst the proprietor leans in on his elbows and points out the controls. It’s the very latest model, with less than 2,000 miles on the clock and the new automatic indicators that flip out from each side. An EA cross points purposefully towards tomorrow on the squat bonnet. The car even *smells* of the future; of plastic and petrol, rubber and metal.

“I’d use those,” says the proprietor, nodding towards the complimentary Automobile Association Road Map of Scotland on the dashboard shelf, then to my old touring map, “not that old thing you’ve got there. This land’s changed a lot since then. New roads. New signs. New names. Places you can’t go…”

I nod. Another quarry truck rumbles by between the petrol pumps and the sea, shaking the dusty air.

“You’ll probably lose them up past Mallaig,” he says; meaning the lorries. “You could try the Duke Of Prussia up there if you’re looking to stay the night. Ross Edwards is a sour old bastard, but he’ll charge you fair.”

The Ladybird’s engine thrums a little harder. Grey powder settles on my face and hands. Licking my lips, I can taste it like soil, like sulphur. I want to get away from here so I work out how to drive this car and find out what Mallaig and all the rest of the Highlands are now like. A grimy place, I imagine Mallaig is now, a mixture of building site and military camp—and the Duke of Prussia is probably a suitably dour location to abandon my Francis memories, my Francis dreams.

The proprietor nods what I take to be farewell, and my hand slides down to feel for the Ladybird’s handbrake. Then he hesitates and leans back

into the car again as more of the traffic pours by.

"At least it's quieter here in the nights now," he says as I stare back at the little carpet on the end of his nose. "You get to sleep pretty easy. But three, four years ago, I used to hear the trucks go past. Tall things, they were, with slatted wooden sides, like the farmers use to take stock to market —only always at night. One of them got a leak, pulled in here, and some lad with a rifle woke me up and ordered me to fix it. A bad smell came off the truck and I could hear movement inside. I thought it was just animals. But there were voices. And you could see their eyes… Bairn's fingers poking out of the slats."

He steps back from the car window. My foot slips, and I stall the engine.

"Petrol cap's on the right side," he says. "And if you see Ross Edwards, tell him I sent you…"

I restart the engine and I struggle with the wheel, pulling out close to the maw of another thunderous quarry truck.

Thus I travel north, grating gears, screeching the Ladybird's dry wipers, passing through waves of time and memory. The new Automobile Association map shows many grey-shaded areas. NO PUBLIC ACCESS. New roads, blue and red like broken capillaries, strike purposefully off only to stop in the middle of nowhere. The Duke of Prussia is as satisfyingly dour as I'd imagined, and the man I take to be Ross Edwards tells me that, no, he's never heard of this part of the world being called the North West Highlands. At least, not by the people who live here.

That night and other nights, alone in yellow-lit rooms with great empty wardrobes, riding the creaking seas of hollowed-out double beds, I study my maps, both old and new. Somehow, like the ghost-ache of a lost limb, Francis is still there beside me, his chin cupped in his hand and bare feet in the air, laughing at something, humming to himself, twiddling his toes, always at ease and in movement at the same time. Then he lays a hand across me and pulls me closer with a touch that is both warmly sexual and at the same time has nothing to do with sex at all.

Francis had loved the place names as we journeyed across Scotland. Mellon Udrigle. Plockton. Grey Dog. Poolewe. Smearisary. The Summer Isles. He'd run his finger along some impossibly contoured and winding

route that the pedals of our basket-fronted Northampton Humbers were supposed to carry us, chosen entirely to include as many of those wonderful names as possible. As is the way in the Highlands, we discovered that the villages and towns were generally disappointing—and that the scenery was beyond our wildest dreams, cast down to stand before us from the craggy glory of some other, better, world.

My eyes blur as I stare at the sheets of these maps and the muffled sound of voices drifts up from the television downstairs in the William Wallace Lounge in—where am I now?—is it Fort Augustus? Or was that yesterday? Swordland. Mhic Fhearchair…The names on that old map dance before me, and I can no longer remember with any certainty where we did actually go. And driving is an effort for me, too, despite the generally fine nature of these widened Highland roads, my Ladybird's obliging engine.

Something rustles in the corner of the room, and I see that Francis is with me again. He's sitting reading the *Daily Chronicle* that he insists on buying every day, absorbed as he follows the international posturing that has followed the assassination of some Archduke in Serbia a month before. *This is real history, Griff,* he said to me once when I expressed amazement that anyone should care about what happens in the Balkans. *How can you pretend to be a historian and then let all this pass you by?*

I undress clumsily and swallow my tablets with a gulp of dusty water. I climb down into acrid over-starched sheets. Oh, Francis, Francis, why do we even have to *have* history? What possible need does it fulfil? Couldn't people just live their lives and die when their time comes without all these empires, this newsprint, these terrible marching armies…? And why can't we still be together?

There were days within those few that Francis and I shared that were yet more perfect: even as we lived them, they stood alone, outside everything, unreachable in their simple sweetness. We rented a cottage miles from anywhere. It was semi-derelict, really, with pink sea thrift flowering on its turf roof, a rough slate floor like something thrown in by the sea, thick walls set with tiny windows overlooking the beach. By then, even the capricious Highland weather had come around to our side, and filled our days with basking heat, white rocks, limitless skies. The nights were only Francis and I.

Soon, I’m with him again, although even in my dreams, it seems, I’m denied a recollection of those perfect days in our cottage by the shore. It feels like many empty years now since I’ve reached them. Instead, we’ve left and have headed south and the weather, looming as if in sympathy with what I imagined was just the finish of a holiday but was in fact the end of almost everything, had turned cold, grey. We’re at the Gulf of Corryvreckan, which, unlike the many wonderfully-named places we’ve talked about but never quite reached, we do at least get within sight of. The waves are roaring and crashing, sending up high curtains of green as we cycle to the end of the rutted track where the tumultuous sea begins, and the sky is low already; dense and angry as the gulf boils and swirls between Scarba and Jura’s desolate northern coast. The boom of water grinding rock —far away and yet deep down; as if it’s part of the earth and the sky and your bones—is like cannon fire, and the high fine spray that rises and drifts is like smoke. A Viking fleet had been lured here and destroyed, or so Francis tells me. An iron merchantman had been torn to shiny talons of scrap. Mere flesh was simply dragged under by the anvil force of these waters, toyed with, stripped of its bones…

Standing there with Francis as the sky darkened and the first heavy drops of rain began to hit our faces with the strength of thrown gravel, I finally realised what Europe was about to be consumed by. And Francis, his eyes fixed on that swirling horizon, his jaw set and the muscles of his neck and shoulders tensed as he leaned against me—he was already a part of it in a way that I never could be. It drew him in. Even the taste of his mouth when we turned and kissed alone in that roaring empty land was strange—or has become strange in my dream. There is caustic earthy taste to my Francis, who was usually so lemony and sweet. A sour mixture of shit and mud.

Further north, further west. The clouds thicken dutifully, bringing rain.

Peering through the Ladybird’s uselessly thwacking wipers, a handkerchief in my fist, blood-pinkened from the stuff I’ve been coughing up all morning, I follow a new road that isn’t on any of the maps. It runs beside the concrete posts and barbed wire of an endless fence, across an endless moor. The land on the far side is mountainous and damp, huge and maliciously innocent; it looks like all the rest of this landscape. And then—

somehow, I missed its approach—an enormous tank comes thundering out of the earth behind me.

An hour later, I take refuge in a pub. The peat in the fireplace smokes and spits as I shiver in a corner, studiously ignored by the locals. Their accents are light, the conversation soft; it's as if there's something sleeping they fear to waken. I know, as I put two tablets on my tongue and lift my glass of cloudy beer with both hands to swallow, that I have truly reached a strange land. John Arthur's face above the bar is my only anchor. I've given up asking if I've finally reached the North West Highlands. Such a place no longer exists—my maps confirm it. It has folded over on itself in the way that places sometimes do in history, and has left no trace.

Things here are no different from the way they were at my acquaintance's old house, which was purchased from the Relocation Board within weeks of my first visit by a family much like the one that had been expelled into nowhere, except that they had two boys instead of girls, and weren't part-Jewish. The broken windows were soon re-glazed, the flower borders were replenished, the trampled front lawn was rolled and mowed back to its customary stripes, the smell of piss in the porch was washed away. The whole sad memory was disinfected.

The rain, the awful beer, this pub, my own sickness and pain; they all disgust me. I think of Francis, his cock in my mouth, my forehead resting against his tautening belly, and of all the things that one must do in life until everything is spent and there is nothing left to face but the turning tides, the great grinding grey engine.

The sheep huddle for shelter as I drive on and the road winds along the hillsides until a white finger of sunlight suddenly presses down on the landscape as if to staunch a wound and the rain begins to clear. I park the Ladybird at a passing point and wander across the sodden heather. This landscape, seemingly so eternal, scars easily. Just ahead of me in a small dip of the land, the tracks of many vehicles have been scrawled across it.

A small lough flashes, and the air is suddenly sweet and clear. The grouse that the laird will be blasting from the air call *Go-back, Go-back.* Roughly centred in the scarring of the tracks, a wide concrete foundation shines like a shield in the new sunlight, and the undergrowth—heather, tiny brownish bilberry, sharp yellow-spangled gorse that gives off a smell of desiccated coconut—is tangled with litter. Old-style packets of Craven A.

Newspapers that the sun and the rain have browned to anonymity. A woman's headscarf. A child's Start-Rite summer sandal. The few soft white clouds that are left in the sky turn and billow as I wander across this empty place, and their playful shadows charge across the valley.

A Fry's Chocolate wrapper. Washed-out cigarette ends. An old dishcloth. The top of a set of false teeth. The foundation in the middle of this bowl in the hills is neat and clean; all the signs of this building have been removed. It was clearly some kind of stopping-off place, but whatever has happened here has finished, and as the wind picks up once again and the sky begins to darken, I decide that this was probably nothing more than a resting place for conscripts on their way south or north.

Something catches my eye as the sun goes out and I begin to trudge back across the moor towards my surprisingly distant Ladybird. It's just another scrap of litter flowering in the undergrowth but, despite my weariness, I sink and clamber across the boggy ground and disentangle it from the heather as the first heavy drops of rain start to thud against my head and shoulders. The fragile paper remains legible despite having swollen to the thickness of blotting paper. The colours still have a gloss and a glow. It's a travel poster really, the kind of thing you end up staring up at in every kind of waiting room. A family, pictured from behind but with their smiling faces turned back towards us, are striding down a winding road that leads to a glittering sea. The father is grinning, beckoning us to join him. The mother holds the hands of her two daughters, who are chattering and skipping excitedly, their pig-tails dancing in mid-air. The ocean beyond the shore to which they are heading is a maze of light. Set within it, more hinted at than actually revealed, yet clearly the focus of the picture, lie a scatter of small islands. Looked at closely before the rain thickens and the paper collapses in my hands, they blur to nothing—just a few clever brush strokes like a Japanese print—but they suggest hills and meadows, wooded glades, white beaches and pretty shingle-roofed and whitewashed houses; a warm and happy place to live. The caption at the bottom reads: RELOCATE TO THE SUMMER ISLES.

9

MY HOLIDAY WITH FRANCIS ended on the 4th of August 1914, when Asquith stood up in the House of Commons to loud cheers and announced that, as a consequence of a treaty signed in 1839 guaranteeing Belgium sovereignty, Britain would be at war with Germany from midnight. The final declaration of war had become so inevitable—that ultimatum that Kaiser Willy would reject as a scrap of paper—that I can't actually remember how we finally heard of it. We'd certainly left our cottage on the shore far behind, and had cycled on from the Gulf of Corryvreckan. I do remember, though, the pub that Francis and I were in that evening, the wild sense of excitement and relief. Suddenly, we were no longer strangers to these wary, courteous people, even though we were English and could hardly understand what they were saying. And the women were in the bar that night, too, drinking beer from jugs as their children whooped and charged up and down the road in the wild darkness outside. It was as if we had all craved this moment; at last, a chance to forget our differences and belong. Suddenly, after years of trying, we could love each other and hate the Germans. Politics and diplomacy seemed trivial compared to the raw certainties of war.

"I'm going, you know," Francis yelled to me from across a table as a huge-breasted woman tried to kiss him. "I'm not waiting, Griff. I need to go straight back…"

I nodded and swallowed my beer. It was no use arguing. And I, too, was elated—it was impossible not to be. Soon, we were dancing in the crowd. Francis even kissed me. That August night, nobody cared. We were all one mass of hope and humanity.

We arranged to have our bicycles delivered back to Ballachulish and our return tickets changed, and ended up spending what was to be our last proper night together in a ridiculously smart hotel in Inveraray as we competed for priority with everyone else who suddenly needed to travel. I had had time by then to ponder how little I really knew about Francis. For a start, he'd always been deliberately vague about his upbringing. I didn't even know where he'd been born and brought up.

“That’s never bothered *me*,” he said when I finally raised it with him. “So why should it bother you?” We were together in our plush double room with bathroom en-suite. We were both a little drunk. We had stopped worrying, in this new wartime world, about prying eyes and we were naked already, lying on the bed with the windows open and the sound of carriages clopping by in the street. Without ceremony, he began to kiss me. It was a good way to stop a conversation. But I sensed that it was too late to get my Francis back—the real Francis, as I thought of him—because so much of him had already left.

Even without the war, our love wouldn’t have lasted, I already had too many questions. Where, for example, had Francis acquired all his sweet proficiency in all the skills of homosexual love? How was it that, with me aged 34 and him just 19, I was the pupil and he was the teacher? A part of me doubted that Francis was wholly committed to spending his life being touched only by men. In truth, I was already well on the way towards becoming that perennially dreadful specimen; the jealous older lover.

On our journey south from the Highlands, following a more complex route than the one we had taken up—and without access to a sleeping carriage—I did my best to talk seriously to Francis. I wanted to fix as much of him in my mind as I could. But he remained teasing about his past. Yes, I went to school but it was just a place. How do you think I learned? Do I have a brother?—well, you tell me. Go on, you know what I’m like, so guess… It was a game we’d played before, but now it was harsher, more hurtful.

As we waited on swarming platforms and changed trains and searched for seats and stood in crowded corridors rattling down past Motherwell, Selkirk, Hexham, Darlington, I ended up telling Francis about myself instead. It had never struck me before that there was much to say, but then I had my book, of course, which already had more to do with me and my own frail hopes and ambitions than it had to do with the study of history. And there was *being the way I am*—a phrase I’d often used in my head but had never been able to speak out loud to anyone. I even told Francis about my dream of Oxford, which seemed like the most intimate thing I could ever tell anyone.

“So, Griff,” he smiled and secretly touched my hand as we leaned against a corridors windows and the sleepers raced by. “You want to be a

Professor?”

I couldn’t answer. It was so much more than that.

“Have you ever even *been* to Oxford?”

“It would spoil the dream.”

“Still, I doubt if it’s all that it’s cracked up to be. People can be thick and snobbish and still tell each other jokes in Latin, you know. But it’ll be different after the War, Griff. You’ll see. Things will change…”

I smiled back at Francis’s hopeful face as the train rocked us towards our separate destinies, wondering if this wasn’t another small thread in the missing pattern of his life. A cold middle-class childhood—perhaps in Suffolk or Norfolk—then some small public boarding school, followed by expulsion for a sexual misdemeanour? Attempting Responsions at Oxford; perhaps even passing, but not quite well enough to get into a college…?

Despite my willing them not to come, Birmingham’s Snow Hill Station and then Lichfield City arrived soon enough. It was one of those overcast days that you often seem to get when you return from somewhere, new union jacks were drooping from many of the shops and churches and there was a chilly restlessness in the air like the snatching of some minor breeze, but otherwise everything about Lichfield seemed much the same. Francis and I parted by a wall outside the station without touching, or even saying very much. I think Francis’s last words to me were “Cheerio then,” and mine were, “Well, thanks anyway.” Something like that. I stood and watched him walk off past the almshouses with that quick gait of his, then lugged my mother’s old suitcase down towards what I still thought of as her house. I was almost looking forward to solitude, a good cry, then back to my book by mid-evening.

A Recruitment Fair was in progress in Saint Martin’s Square. A brass band played as men queued up to join the Staffordshire Regiment on a be-ribboned stage beside the statue of Doctor Johnson. Jolly as a works outing, talking and laughing freely in the way that we British so seldom do, they beckoned me to join them. I shook my head and explained that I was a schoolmaster, and much too old. The way things were then, there was no animosity—it was looked upon as my loss. The same Fair must still have been in progress later on when Francis went down and signed away his life to the King.

That evening, I find another pub, its walls blazing white in a late spasm of sunlight amid the drystone fields. I get a curious satisfaction from gouging a line of bare metal along the Ladybird's passenger side as I turn around the gatepost.

A woman in curlers in the tobacco-browned bar sends me up the stairs, then left and then up the next left again. After wrestling with the tricky geometric problem of getting the suitcase through the door into my slope-ceilinged top floor room, and, feeling sick and sweaty, I collapse on the bed and let the wheezing springs rock me like a sea. Then I'm doubled up, retching and gasping.

A blank period follows. When I awake, my chin is wet, my head throbs and slippery pools of piss and mucus lie around me. But I'm too weary to get up, or even burrow down into my suitcase to find another tablet. A warm angel fans my face, whispering of better things beyond the pain. I sense that, outside the window, through ripples of mist and grey long-angled sunlight and the laughing whoops of children, the summer twilight of this or some other day is fading.

A fist bangs at my door. Intent on not moving—on not doing anything apart from concentrating on the difficult business of breathing—I murmur a useless reply.

What passes for night in these high latitudes floats in. The sky at my window fades from pink to pale blue, then glows pink again. At some point, I manage to drag myself off the damp coverlet and actually climb into bed. I'm conscious for a while that I still have my shoes on. Voices murmur. A pain hardens inside me. Twisted the way I am, and in the hen-clucking light of what I suppose must be morning, I can see the spines of two books lying on the dusty glass-topped bedside table. The Bible, and John Arthur's *Collected Speeches, Volume IV, 1933–4.*

There's sunlight at my window. From downstairs, I can hear someone singing, pots banging. There is the faint smell of burnt fat and bacon frying; the smell, too, that comes from the leakage and dissolution of my body. At some point, I begin to cough again. This time, I am able to watch from a blessed distance as my pillows are rained with blood. I remind myself of who I am. At least, who I think I might be. My mind turns the worn-out gears of my unfinished book. *Figures*—no, wasn't it *Fingers?—of History.* The pages wait. Now, where was I? There's Napoleon, striding beneath

baroque ceilings along the brass and velvet lines of nobodies at one of those ceremonies which the French love almost as much as the English. And there I am, waiting. The knife beneath my robes. I cough again. The knife twists. The moment falls. My hands are bloody.

Inner darkness, even when it finally seems to beckon, comes less easily than I'd imagined. Like some plate-spinning acrobat, I struggle from one blazing window of my consciousness to the next, trying hard to pull down all the shutters at once and get away from this place forever. But the shutters keep flying up, and the landscape beyond them is hurrying, roaring as the telegraph lines rise and fall, rise and fall. And there are voices, too. Little *eeeks* of disgust and the clatter of a mop bucket before I am prodded and tugged. I am lifted and dropped. My jaw is parted wide. Something long and thin is pushed past it.

When I finally awake, I discover that a nurse is leaning over me amid high green walls, echoes, and the smell and the cool crinkle of a rubber mattress. She smiles. Her pin-on watch and her EA badge wink in the light from a tall window.

Time passes. My nurse goes and comes again. Her blouse has short sleeves and I notice, as she plumps up my pillows and does painful and unaccountable things to bits of me, the golden wheatfields of down that lie across her arms, and her warm human scent as she leans over me. Smiling, she takes the tube that runs down my throat and gives it a playful wiggle. I'm sure that she truly loves me.

"You're lucky to come through," says my nurse as she sits beside me soon after the doctor, who has also assured me how lucky I am, has continued his tour of the wards. "Five years ago, Mr. Brook, there was no hospital here. They'd have had to have taken you all the way down to Stirling or maybe up to Inverness." She smoothes the pleat of her skirt in the morning light. "I doubt you'd have made it."

"I'm dying anyway. I have cancer."

My nurse looks at me. "We don't talk like that here. Haven't you ever heard of remission?"

I nod. But no one's ever said the word to me as if it might actually happen.

"So you were up on your holidays from Oxford, then?"

“I thought it would be a good chance to re-visit some old places… The North Western Highlands. The Summer Isles…Have you heard of the Summer Isles?”

She thinks for a moment as the open window above us brings birdsong and the scents of a garden. “Well, no. I’m not sure I have. But there are so many islands here. Of course, our boys have a lot of them now. For the exercises and the training before they go down to Sussex and Kent.”

“I found the Summer Isles on my old map—the one I brought with me from last time. And then on a poster. But they’re not on the new map I was given from the Automobile Association. It’s just blue sea as if they’d sunk or something. Look…” I struggle to sit up.

Her hand, supple, smelling faintly of baby oil and carbolic, strong as the weight of the sun, presses me down. “I wouldn’t bother yourself with that now, Mr. Brook. Save your energy. Have a rest.” She consults the watch on her pinafore. “For sure, these old maps are useless. There’s new roads now, Mr. Brook. New bridges like the one they’ve just opened across to Skye. Even new places like this one. If I were you, I should look to the future and throw away any old things you might have.”

She places her hands on her knees preparatory to getting up. From down the corridor comes a tinkling and a sigh of wheels.

“That’ll be the tea trolley.”

“Look,” I say quickly. “People were supposed to have been relocated up on those islands. Don’t you remember? Or perhaps you were too young then, still at school. We used to call them undesirables. There were gypsies, Irish expats, homosexuals, Jews…”

Her mouth tightens in a lemony scowl. She looks down at me, disappointed. “Mr. Brook—”

“—And there was a man I spoke to in… Some town. It was on one of the main roads. He told me about lorries like cattle trucks. Lorries with people inside them, they were…” I pause to cough. “Heading…” Another, more vicious this time, wracks me. “North…”

She has the rueful look on her face as I regain my breath that teachers reserve for basically decent but occasionally naughty children.

“As for those trucks, the Summer Isles, those stories of yours,” she says. “I’d put that down to experience if I were you. Here in the Highlands, Mr. Brook, if you go around asking the same question often enough,

someone’s going to give you the answer they think you want to hear.” She touches my stubbled chin, ruffles what’s left of my hair. “Don’t you see? It was just a leg-pull…”

She stands up and walks down the ward through the bars of summer sunlight, humming.

Francis wrote me the occasional letter at first after he volunteered. *Griff, you’d hardly know me now…* I could almost see him trying on his new soldierly identity. The letters were filled at first with catalogues of acquaintances and military stupidities as he was posted around various training camps and temporary barracks in southern England. They grew shorter and blander once he reached France and the rapidly solidifying Western Front. I was like the millions of puzzled relatives and loved ones who were the recipients of such letters. I put his terseness down to shortage of time, and then to the military censors. But soon, by early 1915, Francis stopped writing to me altogether.

The War in Britain was a strange affair, like a fever. People were more sociable, strangers would talk to each other, and even I went out more often; to the theatre or to the music hall, or to one of the new cinematographs where we all laughed at Chaplin, wept for Lorna Doone and then sang along afterwards with the *cartunes* as a little ball of light danced across the screen. At school, I taught my lads about the many historic acts of German aggression, and had them compose outraged letters to the Kaiser about the Zeppelin bombings of Great Yarmouth.

Two years passed. I only learned about Francis by chance while I waited at Lichfield station to take the train to the Municipal Reference Library in Birmingham. Queuing for a copy of the *Post* from the John Menzies bookstall on Platform 1, already planning the research for my book, I suddenly thought I heard Francis’s name being spoken as the elderly lady in front purchased her packet of Brown’s Patent Cough Sweets. The staff here had changed many times since he’d left, and I was sure I was suffering from an auditory hallucination—the whispers of ghosts. But still, I found myself asking if there had been any word about Francis Eveleigh, who used to work here, as I handed over a penny for my paper.

I knew, then, what the woman at the counter was going to tell me. I knew from the change that came over her expression. It was a fainter echo

of what I'd seen many times before since the War had started on the faces of teachers and mothers at school, and people you passed in the street and suddenly knew, knew without their saying, that you could no longer ask about their son, their husband, their brother. Francis had died in the Somme Offensive.

Pushed numbly into action, prodding and probing at the true facts of Francis Eveleigh's life in a way that I had resisted before, I was able to track down his real home without too much difficulty. There was his old landlady. There was a postman who knew about a redirection order for his mail. Thus, on a winter evening late in 1916, following the directions that the station porter had given me down small antique streets that opened out into puddled fields, I met Francis's father and mother.

The Eveleighs lived in a large house at the end of a long drive set in arable countryside just outside Louth in Lincolnshire. Standing on that cold day in my muddy shoes as quizzical light fanned from their hall, I introduced myself to the maid as a friend of his from Lichfield, and was ushered into the drawing room where Mr. and Mrs. Eveleigh stood still as china figures on either side of the unlit fire. It seemed as if they had been motionless for a long time, waiting there for me as the light greyed and their days swept by. Despite the seemingly tenuous connection, our association lasted until the end of the War. The hallway of their house always smelled of dog and galoshes—not that they ever *had* a dog—and whichever room you were in, you could always hear the panicky beat of several clocks. Mr. Eveleigh managed a bank; in those days it was still considered a gentleman's profession. His wife (Francis's eyes and pale skin, his full dark hair that she always tied back in a bun) oscillated between various groups and societies. They were so solid, so dependable, and I was flattered and charmed that they were prepared to have anything to do with me. Of course, Francis had refused all their offers since leaving home, although they knew that he had been living in some ghastly little room above a butcher's in Lichfield. He had even refused, or so I was told, help with getting an officer's commission when they heard that he had enlisted. From what little that the Eveleighs knew about their son's life in Lichfield, I think that I, being a schoolteacher, older, a householder, and reasonably well-spoken, came as a reassurance. There was no hint, of course, that Francis and I had been lovers—or even that he'd had any kind of sexual life. But there was

always a sense, somewhere amid all the weekends I was invited to the Eveleighs' house, of a shared deeper fondness.

Whatever else happens in this century, better historians than I will use the War as a line to draw between what came before and what came after. Contrast and examine, if you will, the golden decadent evenings of the Edwardian Era (which I somehow seemed to miss) and the grimness and depression of the pre-Modernist Twenties (which I certainly didn't). For me, though, the process was more insidious and gradual. The coursing anger which John Arthur rose upon and now attempts to control was already there long before the War ended. It was in me, and it was in Mr. and Mrs. Eveleigh.

The light was always grey at the Eveleigh's house, and a chill came to whatever part of your body was turned from the fire. I must have been there several times in summer, yet in my memories the fields are shining brown, the skies are always filled with weepy clouds. Even when it wasn't raining, I would come back sodden from my solitary walks across the low wet hills and between the dripping hedgerows. The clocks ticked and the cold fire spat as we sat in the dining room for meals of boiled cabbage, boiled potatoes and boiled bacon. It wasn't hard to see why Francis had run away.

Being aspirantly middle class, which meant something more exclusive in those days, I found it easy enough to fit in. And there was always the pleasure of being able to sleep in Francis's own childhood bed which still bore the imprint of his body, to slide open drawers that contained the starched uniforms of the various cheap public schools he had been forced to attend and bury my face in their folds. I was introduced to supposed childhood playmates as *dear Francis's best friend.* No one blamed me for the fact that he had left them, and died as an ordinary Tommy. I was an honourary member of the Eveleigh family.

Striding out with me across the soggy lawns at the back of the house, prodding his walking stick angrily at mole hills as the rooks cawed and circled the misty oaks, Mr. Eveleigh would talk endlessly about the War.

"Tell me, as a historian, Brooke," he'd begin—a phrase which would get anyone on my good side—and then he'd ask whether I thought tanks or airships or aeroplanes or some new kind of poison gas or bullet would finally bring about victory. His biggest fear was that it would all fizzle out as suddenly as it had began; with everyone saving face in some meaningless

treaty. Even though Francis was seldom mentioned, the sub-text of all of this was that Mr. Eveleigh wanted the War to have a proper conclusion that would make sense of his son's death.

Mr. Eveleigh asked me about the Jews; whether I didn't think they were involved in a conspiracy to set one half of Europe against the other. I think he may have even mentioned *dumping the buggers on some remote Scottish island and leaving them to get on with it.* He explored the possibility that the feeble French Army had dragged us into the Somme Offensive. He asked me if I agreed that the average working man was fundamentally lazy, and probably no better at getting the job done in the battlefield than he was in the factory—hence the damnably long time this whole business was taking. He wondered, now that crime and conspiracy were clearly so rife, if it wasn't time for the Home Secretary to introduce much harsher measures. He mused upon the loyalties and motives of the nation's young women, the dreadful, unfeminine clothes they'd taken to wearing. He doubted whether democracy was really the best way of running the country now that every Tom, Dick and Harry had been given the vote, and asked me if I agreed with him that Lloyd George, for all his bluster, was probably just a Welsh windbag—and that what this country really needed was a true, strong leader…

In fact, Mr. Eveleigh said the kind of things that we British had always been saying. I'd heard them often enough before from old ladies on the backs of trams and prim couples at school parents' evenings, and I'd read them in editorials in the *Mirror* and the *Express.* So I generally found myself agreeing with Mr. Eveleigh to save the bother of arguing. He was one of those people, anyway, who imagine that everyone shares their values. On the few occasions that I attempted to argue as we strode about that soggy lawn, he didn't really notice.

Mrs. Eveleigh, of course, held no political opinions, other than that the Germans routinely raped nuns. She kept herself to herself, and by mid-evening smelled sweetly of sherry.

The last time I saw them both was after the French Capitulation, when the initial cease-fire treaty had been signed in Paris. I remember that my train journey up through Peterborough and Lincoln took place in an atmosphere that was as feverish as it had been four years before—but also very different. Strangers were talking to strangers again, but their voices

were confused, their faces were hard and angry. Someone tried to start a fight with me as I went down the corridor to the buffet carriage, tapping my shoulder and pressing me against the condensation-streaked glass as he yelled obscenities in my face. Through the benefit of my almost frictionless life, I looked young enough at 36 to have volunteered. Indeed, I could have sacrificed my reserved occupation during the War's later stages and done so.

There was talk already of Lloyd George's resignation and of a General Election, although since all the major parties—and most people—had all supported the War, no one had any clear idea of what the campaign would be about. There were more people than usual milling around as I lugged my suitcase through the rainy streets of Louth. Shouts came from the pubs, and no one seemed to be working. Women and children cringed in doorways; fearing, no doubt, the beating they'd get later on. Unattended dogs howled. The posters and the flags that had hung out for most of the War—RED CROSS OR IRON CROSS? WHAT DID YOU DO IN THE WAR DADDY? YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU. IT IS FAR BETTER TO FACE THE BULLETS THAN BE KILLED AT HOME BY A BOMB—suddenly looked sad and faded. But I didn't see one proper fight, and only one broken window. The English, the *British* Way is to remain polite and say little: to try hard, even in defeat, to be sensible and positive.

I brought one of the few papers that were left at a newsagents and stared at a headline. WAR OVER. ALLIES DEFEATED. It was 6 August 1918; a day, it seemed to me, that was too ordinary to bear this indignity, and would never look right in the cold pristine pages of history. Like everyone else, I simply couldn't believe it.

The Eveleighs were holding a sort of open house that day. The front door—was wide open. It seemed to me a bizarre touch: final confirmation that everything had changed. People were milling. There were clients from the bank, friends from the bridge circle, farmers and neighbours. All were red-faced and talking loudly. I remember that the usually neat rugs were rucked-up, that the tiled floors were swirled with mud. Mr. Eveleigh was moving from group to group, dispensing sherry and port, and Mrs. Eveleigh was sitting in her usual corner, smiling tightly with a glass clenched in her trembling hands. Outside, beyond the misted windows, molehills still dotted the lawn. The rooks still circled and cawed.

Time passed. Voices grew louder, then began to fade. Someone was surreptitiously sick in the scullery sink. One of the maids passing around sausage rolls chose the moment to give her notice. People began to drift unsteadily up the drive as darkness settled.

I had, I suppose, as much reason as anyone to want to drown my sorrows, and I went through the same alcoholic cycle of loud sociability followed by depression. I was tired and I had a headache by the time the remaining maids had cleared things up and I and Mr. and Mrs. Eveleigh found ourselves suddenly alone. Still, Mr. Eveleigh insisted as he always did in talking to me in the chilly firelit parlour whilst Mrs. Eveleigh continued to sip sherry in her corner. He spread a *News Chronicle* map of Belgium and France across the leather-topped table and weighed down each corner with the clumsy patience of the inebriated, then asked me to explain to him exactly who was to blame for this mess.

I did my polite best. I was as surprised as everyone else at the suddenness of our defeat, but even now with our soldiers stuck bootless and weaponless in POW holding camps, I could feel the wisdom of hindsight creeping in. No doubt making less sense than I imagined, I explained to Mr. Eveleigh how the economies of all the nations had been seriously weakened by the War: how, politically, its continued conduct was becoming unsustainable. Something was bound to give. It had already happened in Russia with the Revolution which, much more than losing the War, was every other European leader's worst nightmare. And the Bolsheviks' treaty had been a capitulation, allowing the Germans to strengthen their morale as they moved all their forces to the Western Front.

For once, Ludendorff's plan to attack at Arras where the French and the British forces met was well-conceived. At long last, as even Haig had shown, both sets of commanders had begun to learn from the mistakes of their campaigns. Once a break had been made in the Allied lines, the Germans used flexible tactics of bursting ahead where resistance was weakest, pausing for the artillery, then pushing quickly on again. The American reinforcements, long-promised, much talked-about, were too few, and came too late. Predictably, whilst the British turned towards the Channel Coast, the French retreated towards Paris. With Haig barely on speaking terms with Lloyd George, and smarting at being second-in-command to the French, the Allied crisis soon became absolute.

As the Germans advanced, the lost certainties of trench warfare, despite all the horrors, seemed almost reassuring. After four years of deadlock, the War was suddenly about movement, communications, swiftness of advance. With Paris succumbing because neither side wanted her pounded to rubble, and the British and Colonial Forces clustered chaotically around Cherbourg and Dieppe, there was nothing left to do but admit defeat, and hope that the Germans would be magnanimous in victory.

"I should never have opened those port bottles I laid down," Mr. Eveleigh said, swaying as he poured me another whisky. "I mean, we can't leave it like this, can we? Betrayed by the Yanks and the French, beaten by the bloody Germans. There'll have to be another war. Things aren't sorted out yet…"

Later, Mrs. Eveleigh showed me up to my room. It was oddly quiet; all the clocks had stopped ticking today because no one had remembered to wind them. But she seemed composed as she lit the gas lantern and then sifted through Francis's old chest of drawers.

"You might as well have these," she said, giving me a child's exercise book with Francis's name on the cover, then a couple of battered tin toys. "If you want them, that is. Something to remember him by…" She pulled open the long wardrobe, stirring the dark clothes, bringing a wash of stale Francis air. "Will you look at that—just one shoe! How can there be only *one* shoe down there? They don't go off on their own, do they? Not that I suppose it matters…"

I watched as she did what I had done many times; touching Francis's old coats and jackets, feeling in the pockets, which contained only gritty dust. I, at my weekends here, had already taken my secret share of bits of Francis-this and Francis-that, the rattier and more used by him the better. An old jumper. That missing shoe.

"Oh, and there's something else," she said, closing the wardrobe again, spinning around, her fingers at her mouth in an uncharacteristic state of excitement. I sat and waited as she left the room and returned bearing a thick cardboard box with a War Office stamp on it, and a sticker beneath bearing the words: S2242 RIFLEMAN FRANCIS EVELEIGH, C COMPANY, 8TH SERVICE BATTALION, THE RIFLE BRIGADE. It still felt odd to think of him like that.

She lifted it open, filling the room with some faint other smell. What was it? Mud? Death? It was certainly unpleasant. “Well,” Mrs. Eveleigh gestured at the open box and I noticed that she was breathing rapidly, far closer than I was to tears. “You might as well have a look and see if there’s anything. After all, this is what Francis was when he died. A soldier…”

It proved to be half empty—as if someone had been through it and stolen the best bits already—although I supposed this was because these boxes came in a standard size and there sometimes wasn’t enough to fill them. There was that cheap edition of *News From Nowhere*, the pages splayed with damp, that Francis had been reading up in the Highlands and had probably, Francis being Francis, never got around to finishing. A pair of thick standard issue grey-green military socks, I suppose they must have been a spare; or thrown in to make the emptiness seem more substantial. They felt slickly damp when I touched them, but that was probably from the atmosphere in this house. More odd was the pistol. It seemed well-kept and in working order, although empty of bullets. Mrs. Eveleigh just gazed down at me as I sat on the bed and handled the thing. Clicking back the hammer. I wondered if, as a private, Francis would have been allowed to use it. Weren’t pistols for officers? So perhaps this was a memento of someone else, a friend or a lover who died in some earlier assault…

“Keep that too,” Mrs. Eveleigh said, something harsh in her voice. “I don’t want it.”

She was standing closer now. Like me, and in her own quiet way, I think she had passed into that grey hinterland that lies beyond an excess of drink. The time when everything seems normal again, and yet the world has become foul, and you are weary and filled with self-disgust.

I glanced around at the familiar wallpaper, the twee pictures, expecting her to turn and leave. But she just stood there in front of me, her hands knotting and unknotting across the long line of buttons that ran down her black dress.

“I only feel as though I’ve lost him now,” she said. “Before I knew we’d thrown away this War, it was always as if some part of him might still come back to me.”

I nodded, staring up at her, this twisted image of Francis as a middle-aged woman. Her eyes were lost in shadow; a shade deeper than black.

“And I wonder, even now, if he ever knew a woman.”

She took a step closer so that our knees touched. I was looking right up at her now, the rapid rise and fall of her breasts, the apertures of her nostrils, the lines of flesh under her chin. Beneath the sour dusty odour of her clothes, she even smelled a little like Francis: Francis if he'd been eating pickles, drinking sherry and gin.

"I never knew what he was like," she said.

"He was…" I tensed my hands, feeling enclosed, threatened. But something snapped within me. All these evasions, the dishonesty. It finally broke. "I loved him, Mrs. Eveleigh. I just loved him…"

She took a step back and nodded severely. I had truly thought for a moment—had wanted, even—that she would kiss me: that we could somehow share our Francislessness together. But, instead, I covered my face in my hands and heard the sigh of her dress as she left the room, and the soft clunk of the door closing.

I crept out from the house early next morning, long before anyone was awake. I trudged through the darkness to the unlit station and sat waiting for the milk train.

The Eveleighs never wrote to me after that.

I never saw them again.

10

I TAKE THE LONG journey back to Oxford after my days of hospitalisation. Several demijohns of bloody jelly have been sucked out of my chest; the infection and the fever have passed entirely. Although I'm still dying, I feel almost well again.

One of the many advantages of leading a privileged life in Modernist Greater Britain is that I don't have to trouble myself with fresh travel arrangements. By the turning of a well-oiled machine, new tickets are booked, new passes are issued, my abandoned Ladybird is returned to the Forge Garage at Ballachulish, my medical records are checked and updated. Even the odd discrepancy in my name between the various official records is easily absorbed. A comfortable ambulance takes me to the station, where a whole empty First Class compartment is pre-booked. The ticket collectors and the stewards have been appraised of my arrival: elderly gent; Oxford don; taken unwell on holiday; not exactly EA top brass or even a member, but connections with the Great Man. All I have to do is stretch my legs beneath my pre-warmed blanket and stare out of the train window.

Finally leaving Scotland one train later and in an even plusher compartment, the smugness of being well cared-for and not quite ill finally breaks into a sense of loss. What, after all, have I discovered? Just a few rumours, a scrappy poster on an empty moor. Already, I can feel the obligations and disappointments of Oxford looming. Cumbernald and this science-and-history business with Bracken, moderating exams, the need to do something with my life before there's nothing left of it. The concept of my book, *The Fingers Of History* (stupid name) seems inherently flawed, and quite beyond my abilities. Those who can't make history write about it. I suppose that those who can't write about it write nothing at all.

Scenery flashes by. I am brought coffee and newspapers, offered an ear attachment that you can plug into a socket and listen to the BBC Light Programme. Carlisle. Penrith. Manchester. I gaze listlessly at the newspapers. They are full of John Arthur's closing speech at the London Olympics. Magnanimously, he congratulates the many foreigners who have won medals. The Russians, in particular, are singled out for praise. Their

scientific training methods are acknowledged; their clean, almost Nordic looks are photographically portrayed in pull-out supplements showing THE LOSERS AND THE WINNERS. Reading all this, I get that faintly vertiginous sensation that is part of Modernist life. Can these be the same bloodthirsty Russians—Communists, although the word is scarcely mentioned now—that the Empire Alliance was supposed to be a bulwark against? Since last year's pact with Stalin, everything has changed.

I flip back towards the SITS VAC, where a Decent Widow is looking for a Clean Anglo Saxon Couple to take care of her and her Nice Surrey House. In the Classified columns, various Modernist and EA self-education courses and camps are on offer, along with supposedly War Office-endorsed photographs of the Mons Archers, framed or unframed—or as a package with *The Illuminated Quotes of John Arthur.* And there are innumerable busts and photographs of the man. One advertiser, in a ploy that I suspect won't be used twice, even dares to suggest that he drinks their Effervescent Tonic and Pick-Me-Up each morning. Still, I can see John Arthur smiling ruefully at that if he saw it. The price of what we still call a free press…

A stray copy of the *Penrith Advertiser* has crept in amongst all the Nationals. The winner of the Regional Manhood Competition smiles out at me from the front page, his kilt falling in ample yet suggestive folds as he squats on caber-tossing thighs. The photo on the back page, beside a column giving advice to Young Mr. and Mrs. Modern on setting up home, is of a poorer quality, kindly taken by a J. H. Wigton. It shows an elderly woman hunched in the stocks on a village green. She has been put there, the caption jokily informs us, as *a show of local outrage.* Similar submissions are invited from other readers.

My train roars on through the night, reaching the Midlands at dawn. Pylons stride off towards the tower blocks of a new town, and an old man, as we slow outside Stoke on Trent, limps along the tracks with a wicker basket over his shoulder, stooping arthritically to collect fallen lumps of coal. He turns to look up at me through the carriage window. Our eyes meet without recognition.

Change at Rugby for Oxford. With half an hour to kill and rumour of my importance seeming to have petered out, I sit untended in the waiting room, which I must share with three members of the Young Empire Alliance. They're little more than lads, really—younger brothers of caber-

tossing Regional Manhood—and yet they affect maturity and ease as they smoke their Pall Malls and stretch out in long-trousered boy-scout uniforms. Is that the ring of a steel toecap I hear as one of them kicks absently at the bench on which I'm sitting? But they're decent lads, even if every other word is fuck or a laughing animal growl and they give off the sweet-sour smell of whatever morning exertion they've been indulging in.

To be sociable as they puff away, I light one of my own Navy Cut Filtered. For once, the sweet acrid smoke dissolves into my lungs without reducing me to spastic coughing. The posters on the walls advertise the joys of visiting Great Yarmouth on the new Sandringham Class trains. Or TRY KINGS LYNN FOR A GREAT ESCAPE. There's even THE DREAMING SPIRES OF OXFORD. Another poster, looking much like the rest, advises ALWAYS REPORT ANYTHING SUSPICIOUS as a plump and cheery constable tips his helmet beneath a blue lamp.

There's something about these YEA boys, the way they are kicking my seat, meeting each others' eyes and talking in half-phrases, that makes me think they are not ignoring me at all. A woman in a floral hat appears at the waiting room window. I shoot her a despairing glance before she decides not to come in. Two of the youths begin to hum a tune under their breath, and alternately kick each side of my bench in rhythm.

Still, I sit there, staring at the posters on the walls, listening hard for the sound of my train.

"Party member?" one of them says suddenly. I stare at him for some seconds before I work out the meaning of his question.

I shrug.

"Thought not." The spottiest of the youths smiles across to his colleagues. "But then I was wondering, because I saw the way that fucking porter was helping you with your fucking luggage when you got off that fucking train."

"I have been ill."

"That right? Look okay to me, you do."

"Thank you. I've almost recovered."

"Where do you live?"

"Oxford," I say, raising a quivering finger in the direction of the poster on the wall.

"Not one of them fucking eggheads, are you?"

“Well, as a matter of fact…”

“Tell you what…” The best-looking of the three lads stands up. His face is tanned. His brown hair is cut so short that it would feel like velvet if you stroked it. He comes close to me and leans down. “The problem is…” A soft rain of his spittle touches my cheek. “I’m all out of matches. Can you light my fag for me?”

He keeps his eyes on mine as I fumble in my coat pocket and his friends watch on, grinning. His irises are an intense, cloudless blue. The scent and pressure of his body surrounds me. He squints slightly as the match flares, and he holds my hand to guide it towards the tip of his cigarette. The tobacco crackles softly as he draws in.

“Well, thanks…”

Moments later, my train chuffs in to its appointed platform and I leave the waiting room, cheerily wishing these lads a good journey. Then, a sweaty wreck, and still bearing an uncomfortable erection, I collapse into the carriage that the porter finds for me.

Oxfordshire comes. Then Oxford. I pay a taxi driver outside the station to take my suitcase to my rooms, then walk into town unassisted—just to prove to myself that I can still do it.

Along Park End and George Street, the city is warm, summer-quiet and at peace with itself now it has lost the unwanted distraction of students, and smells sweetly of dusty bookshops, old stone, dog shit, grass clippings. The display in the main window of Blackwells is for a book by some bishop entitled *Christian Thoughts On The Future Of A Greater Britain,* and a string of Pickfords’ lorries are parked outside the Bodleian. Whistling men are carrying large tea chests filled with books up the ramps. Wearily turning the corner with all but the last few yards of my long journey behind me, I’m struck by the thought that Oxford really *has* changed. Egged on by her fitter, younger relatives who care nothing for the things she once stood for, she dresses now like a senile old dowager in unsuitably modern clothes. Powdered and stumbling, a parody of all she once was, she falls into the heedless arms of the future.

I turn past the grinning college gargoyles who supposedly represent of some of the early dons. There is, I see, a long black Bristol parked beside the NO PARKING sign in front of my college gates. A uniformed KSG

chauffeur is leaning against its side, smoking and looking bored whilst Christlow chatters to him.

"Someone for you, sir…" Christlow says, nearly falling over the tea-tray he's put down on the pavement. "Right at the moment. Up in your rooms."

"Thank you, Christlow. It's nice to be back."

"I, ah, saw your case up there personally from the taxi, sir. Sorry to hear you were a bit ill. Do hope you had a good holiday…"

I walk on as his voice rings down the passage. I cross the quad, head along the cloisters, climb the old oak stairs and stride down the sun-threaded corridor to my rooms with all the briskness of a younger, fitter man; eager to get whatever this new thing is over with as quickly as possible. Someone from the KSG wants to see me. It's no big deal—happens to people all the time; some of them must even live to tell about it. Anyway, what have I got to lose?

The door is slightly ajar, but my name, reassuringly, is still on it, and when I go inside my suitcase sits placidly in the middle of the floor like an old dog that can't quite be bothered to raise itself and greet me. I don't know what I expected, but the KSG man is standing by the window that overlooks the quad, and he has that still-but-startled air of someone who's nearly been caught doing something—perhaps flicking through the many piles of manuscript that I had left heaped on my desk.

"Mr. Brook—it *is* right to call you Mr., is it? This funny little fat man who kept buzzing around me and trying to get me to eat biscuits told me you weren't quite a professor…"

"That's right. I've just come back…" I gesture around at my room as if in explanation. "From a curtailed holiday."

"I heard you were taken ill. I'm sorry."

He takes a step away from the window. I admire the various glints and shadows of his crisply-pressed dark blue uniform, the smell of good cigarettes and hair oil as he offers me his hand.

"My name's Tony Anderson. I'm a Captain in the Knights of Saint George—what everyone calls the KSG—and I'm currently seconded to the Cabinet Office." He reaches inside his jacket. The hairs of my neck prickle. "I have a card here somewhere…"

"No. That's alright."

“I won’t take up much of your time, Mr. Brook. In fact, I’d have picked you up from the station myself but the lines got crossed somewhere. And there’s the traffic from London…” He pulls a face. His skin is pale. His shiny black hair is pressed down slightly at the sides—which comes, I suppose, from wearing his peaked officer’s cap. His chin is square and dimpled. He permits himself the luxury of slightly longer-than-regulation sideburns. “Still, it’ll all be much better when they build the motorway.”

“What do you want?”

“I’m just the delivery boy.” He walks over to one of my button leather armchairs and clicks open an official briefcase. He produces a long envelope. “This is for you…”

He holds it out whilst I stare at it.

“A ridiculous expense, I know, Mr. Brook. Sending me up here—and in a car with a chauffeur when it would have been just as simple by train. Goodness knows what the press would make of this sort of wastage if they heard about it. But then again, if they knew who the letter was actually *from*…”

Finally, I take the envelope from him. *G. Brooke.* I feel a different kind of premonition.

“Who’s it from?”

“I won’t spoil it by telling you. But I *do* just need you to sign this.” He offers me a clipboard from his briefcase with what looks like an ordinary correspondence chit. Document CWR 776/234/DSA—1. I use the creamy Parker Flight pen he offers to sign it. “There was some confusion,” he adds, his breath faintly citrus as he stands close to me and inspects my scrawl, a ribbon line of medals across his chest, “about the *e* at the end of your name.”

“Don’t worry. It comes and goes.”

“I’ll be off then—you know how it is. Things to do. Thank you for your time…”

Stiffly, he turns and leaves the room, pulling the door fully shut behind him. It’s something I’ve noticed with my ex-demob students—the difficulty military people have in *not* marching.

I stare at the envelope as his footsteps fade, wondering if I should play a game with myself for a while and let it rest… But already my hands are

tearing at the embossed crest, the wax seal, dragging out the one small sheet of paper that lies inside.

Beneath a lion and unicorn crest, it reads:

WHITEHALL
FROM THE OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER

8 August, 1940

G B —

I know it's been a long time, but I honestly haven't forgotten.

You may have heard that there's going to be a "National Celebration" in London before and around 21st October, Trafalgar Day. It probably still seems a long way off, but these things take a lot of planning. I'd really like to see you there. I promise it'll be nothing "formal".

I really do hope you can make it. My staff will send you the details.

All the very best as ever,

J A.

11

THIS LONG AUGUST, ALL of Britain seems to drift, held aloft on wafts of dandelion and vanilla, the dazzling boom of bandstand brass. Each morning, the Express, the New Cross and the Mail vie for punning headlines and pictures of Modernist maidens in fountains, ice cream-smeared babies, fainting guardsmen. Everything, I had stupidly imagined, would be settled on my return from Scotland. Some great truth would be revealed. My book—somehow—would be written. I would die. But, with or without me, life seems intent on going on.

I keep my windows open day and night to admit what cool air there is into my rooms, and with it comes the scent of wisteria and hot stone, of the parched earth of our quad that has revealed the faint outline of some long-forgotten Saxon building in these near-drought days. I dream of killing Napoleon. I am surrounded by pointless history. After my illness in Scotland, I find that I am weaker. With the generosity that doctors reserve for the dying, I have been prescribed even bigger bottles of pain-killers, anti-inflammatories and some new wonder of Modernist science called penicillin. I am sure that they are all adding to the fevered warmth of this great Summer Isle. Now, I am able to accept the dizzying surges, the strange buzzings and twangings, the luminous dreams, the odd blurrings and shiftings of reality.

By any normal standards, my life's work is already done. For most of the time, it didn't seem like *work* at all—or even much of a life, for that matter. I walk on. I say my few lines. I walk off again. I am about to get started, then I finish. Most alarming of all is that I feel no more disappointment about myself than I would for a student who, whilst not inherently lazy, never quite achieves the things he might. In the great schemes of things, it scarcely matters.

Freed from the ties of being conventionally ill—a luxury that only the truly healthy can afford—I find that I remain remarkably active. I have asked Christlow, for example, to serve my breakfast a full hour earlier at quarter to seven. Then, by half past eight or nine at the latest I can manage to be fully dressed, my lungs coughed-out, my tablets taken, my limbs

unstiffened, my eyes fully focused, my heartbeat and my breathing made almost regular. Thus aroused, I have taken a surprising number of trips out this August.

I have wandered, with the walking stick I now affect, the seafront at Brighton, and I have breathed the air fresh with sunlight and the cries of gulls that for me will always bring images of sandy limbs, salt-powdered fingers, the whispers of sun-dried lips; a giddy sense of erotic regret. I have taken the train back to my home town of Lichfield, and have walked along those strangely shrunken streets that are sweetly sticky with the smell of hot tarmac. I have looked over the low front wall of my mother's house sold six years before, and I have noted the new pebbledash, the new window frames, the concrete path set with coloured glass. Hindleys' Cake Shop where she worked is still there with what look like the same cakes displayed in the window, although there's now a self-service tea shop at the back. The butcher's shop above which Francis used to live has become a gent's outfitters, and the window of the room where he used to sleep now bears the words FORMAL DRESS HIRE. The Scales is no longer a tanners' pub—there aren't any tanners left, these chemical days. On the lunchtime that I go into it, it's filled with lads and lassies from all the nearby solicitors, accountants, banks, building societies, investment advisors, insurance brokers and estate agents. The women wear suits much like the men. They drink the same drinks, laugh at the same jokes.

My old school is the one place where I could be certain of recognition; which is why I avoid it. Instead, I take the bus in search of Burntwood Charity. But there is no sign of the school where I started my career—or even of the road that led to it with fields on the far side, or of the pit wheels. The whole place consists of nothing but houses and a vast new comprehensive school.

I have also, by the more complex routes that travelling east-west in this country always involve, re-visited Louth. The taxi ride out from the town to the Eveleighs' old house seems far longer than I ever remembered the walk being, and even here the sun is out, baking the Lincolnshire Wolds, evaporating what little remains of my memories. But the house is still there at the end of its long drive, although with the bluish look of a colour photograph left out too long in the sun.

“Might as well have a good look now we’ve come this far,” says the taxi driver as he pulls through the gate. He parks on the new gravel amid a scatter of other cars, and a brisk grey-haired woman comes charging out from the doorway.

“So *good* that you could come,” she says, opening the taxi door, shaking my hand. “I’m the Assistant Day Matron, Mrs. Larvin. Well—let’s not beat about the bush, shall we…?”

As I’m ushered inside and I notice that, yes, the inner hall does still smell faintly of galoshes and dog, I see that the house is now PRIMROSES NURSING HOME FOR THE ELDERLY.

“How long,” I ask, “has this been a nursing home?”

“I suppose,” says Mrs. Larvin, who clearly imagines I’m a prospective resident, “since the mid-twenties.”

“And before that, it was a private house?”

“As far as I know. Of course, it’s been completely re-furbished. Over here, we have our new self-operate lift. Some of our guests take a while to get used to it, but of course there’s nothing to be frightened of. You just press this button…”

Mrs. Larvin closes the brass trellis and we rise up with an electric buzzing, then she leads me along garishly-wallpapered corridors. The house is essentially the same, even if the clocks are no longer ticking, but it’s still an effort to keep my bearings. Old people draped in tartan rugs sit around in high-backed chairs in rooms where the walls have been knocked through into large communal areas. Many of these creatures wouldn’t look out of place in an Oxford fellows’ room, but the air here smells more like a school; faintly of stationery cupboards, faintly of cabbage, faintly of urine. The small second floor bedroom at the back of the house, which I express a special wish to see, is already allocated.

“Still,” Mrs. Larvin says, leaning on the same old heavy brass door handle with the dent in the middle. “I’m sure Mr. Edmunds will be pleased to see you.” She’s even mastered the trick that I did those years ago when I used to sleep here of giving the door a slight pull before pushing it open.

“*Here* we are!” She trills. “See—a visitor for you!”

Mr. Edmunds lies in his bed. The sunlight is indecently bright. He has the nose and cheekbones of an Egyptian mummy, and he’s clearly senile, incoherent, incontinent. Amazingly, amid the clutter of his life—pictures of

relatives, several fine models of ships in glass cases, uneaten grapes and chocolates on his bedside table—the tall wardrobe that once contained Francis's coats and shirts still stands in exactly the same place against the wall. I'd be tempted to open and take a look inside it if Mrs. Larvin wasn't at my shoulder. It would be no surprise to find Francis's old jackets and school clothes still swaying and jangling on their metal hangers, that single lonely shoe.

"I suppose there are worse things than living too long…" I say to Mrs. Larvin as we breathe the fresher air outside Mr. Edmunds's room again.

Mrs. Larvin gives me a look, then dabs her handkerchief to her brow. "We never give up. As long as you have life, as we say here at Primroses, there's always something you can do with it. Now, if I could just show you our kitchens, of which we're especially proud…"

Glancing out of a window at the wide lawns at the back of the house as she leads me along these disinfected ways, I notice that they're still having problems with the moles. I finally make my departure just before tea is served, leaving promises that I'll have a good think about coming here, and a false name and address.

Back in Louth, still probing at the past like a tongue burrowing a sore tooth, I visit the Town Library and spend a couple of hours in useless research. Just as in Oxford, just as in Lichfield, the census data and the voting lists and the rating and the parish records and pretty much every kind of document covering the period between the end of the War and the start of the thirties has been destroyed. Here, in fact, the scythes here have cut even deeper. Even the *records* of the records had gone, along with the spaces they were supposed to occupy. It's as if a whole decade has vanished entirely.

With an hour still left to kill before the next Peterborough train, I end up wandering around St James's Church. I can't remember ever seeing this gloriously light and tall spire before when it wasn't truncated by clouds and rain. The graveyard here filled up centuries ago, and there's little room left now to commemorate the descendants of the ancient vergers and worthies who rest here, although there's a corner by the outer wall—grubby, seems to me, with wilting flowers and a sense of deaths so recent that they have yet to be cloaked by history—where a few recent additions have squeezed in. Scanning the names and dates, I discover one that reads:

IN MEMORY
OF
HERBERT & ELIZABETH EVELEIGH
1868—1922
1873—1919

The stone is plain polished granite, thick and deeply chiselled. It feels cold even in this heat. And it just sits there. No flowers. No sign that anyone has ever come to pay their respects. I lean against it as the warm air swarms around me and the sky presses down.

Mrs. Eveleigh must have died the year after I last saw her, probably in the flu epidemic that ended up killing more people in a single winter than we humans could manage in four years of industrialised slaughter. And Mr. Eveleigh only lasted for another couple of years after that—I doubt if managing a bank in the early twenties, which meant closing companies, calling in the bailiff, would have given him much reason to carry on…

When the train from Louth to Peterborough finally arrives, it has to be re-routed because this summer heat has buckled the main line rails. So instead I travel slowly and single-track through the late afternoon, and end up beached on the platform of a rural station with the faint promise of an eventual Oxford-bound train. There, talking to the lonely station master, a round-faced man whose body bulges gently from the gaps between the buttons and joins of his uniform like rising dough, we surprise each other by giving off signs that we are available.

The station is empty; the rails stretch down through Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire amid nodding scoops of cow parsley and wild fennel. The pigeons are cooing. The air seems joined to the sky. We stand up from our bench and move off towards the tin heat of his office. He checks timetables before closing its shutters, then pulls some bell-and-wire mechanism—*ping*, *ping*—to send a message down the line. For once, there is no fear and no hurry. He helps me remove my clothing, and then removes his own. We stand naked as babies, anticipatorily erect whilst the seaside faces smile down at us from the walls. SKEGNESS IS *SO* BRACING. BARMOUTH FOR MOUNTAIN SAND AND SEA. The moment is so perfect that it almost seems a shame to go on.

The promised train does eventually come, and the stationmaster and I make our farewells; bashful strangers once again. I gaze out of the carriage as the train rattles on and his seed slowly seeps out of me, almost crying. By Oxford and the weary walk back from the station, my mind is finally made up. For once in my life, I will do something.

If my new project is not to be like so many other things, I decide as I build a small fire in the grate of my rooms and begin to feed it with the pages of my book, I must be persistent and precise. I must be cold. I must be heartless.

Glowing fragments of paper dance up the chimney. Everything, after all, ends this way—the only question is how, and when. Napoleon, Peter The Great, Bismarck… The pages curl. The ink shows briefly pale, then fades to dry smoke and crackling heat. Already gone; mere history. All that's left to change is now. And the future.

I feed in more of the paper, huge sheaves of it now that are already brown with age, crisp as leaves long ready for a bonfire. I rummage through my drawers for a tin of lighter fuel and squirt it, causing a great leap of flame. Soon, there's barely anything left of my book to burn, and my life feels simpler already.

To Blackwells, then, and to the Bodleian, where much of the space made by those emptied shelves has been taken up by the plump spines of Modernist Literature. I pluck out armloads with titles like *The Great Years, Man or Myth? A Hero's Life* and *The World Vision.* Some of the names on the front plates are familiar, as are some of the books. I could kick myself now for my silly acts of rebellion in refusing to keep the many complimentary or review copies that came my way. After all, I will need to gather as much information as I can, if I am to kill John Arthur.

Over the years, I have been visited by a fair number of authors, journalists and crackpots. My name often appears in their acknowledgements; *Geoffrey Brook, for his invaluable help* (a stilted pub lunch and a promise to "get back soon for a proper chat"). Yet, by confirming that I briefly taught John Arthur at Burntwood Charity, then refusing to make up any more stories beyond those that have already appeared in the *Daily Sketch*, I am the subject more of evasion than enlightenment within the actual pages. Not that it isn't accepted that John Arthur wandered somewhat in his early years, but his accent remains

distinctly South Yorkshire. Too great an emphasis on anywhere else would simply confuse his adoring public. Of course, John Arthur himself remains mute on the subject. When asked, he would no doubt profess amazement that anyone would even care about his background. That is why his people love him.

The commonly accepted truths about John Arthur's upbringing are that he was born John Arthur of William and Mary Arthur on 21 October 1890 in a suitably pretty cottage (now open to the public) in Cornwall, not far from Tintagel. Mary Arthur died in childbirth, whilst William Arthur—a mysterious figure; the books try hard not make him seem shady—and his son ended up travelling up through Britain. William supported them both by working as a labourer and carpenter. His son didn't regularly attend school; in fact, in the popular imagination, John Arthur never even lived in a house before the age of about twelve. He slept in barns, beneath hay ricks, under the stars. He sat on milestones gazing into the future.

Most curious of all to me as a historian is the welter of documentary proof that supports these quasi-truths. There are birth certificates, marriage certificates, wage slips, baby shawls and cribs, even actual chairs that William Arthur supposedly crafted. It all seems like a deliberate ploy, but more likely, a few forgeries, hopes and mistakes, and some quite genuine references, have all been stirred up by the Greater British consciousness to make one satisfying whole. In the more farfetched books, you even find pictures of John Arthur hand-prints in stones, John Arthur hawthorns that lean against the prevailing wind, miraculous John Arthur wells and John Arthur graveyards sporting naturally-formed Modernist crosses; phenomena which have shaken off their previous associations with some saint just as easily as they shook off the pagan gods who came before them.

A small link with Burntwood is generally made along the lines of: *William Arthur set about learning his new trade as a miner in a pit (now-disused) in Southern Staffordshire, where John also briefly attended school before heading north to the South Yorkshire village of Raughton.* The famous pit at Raughton has also closed—except to tourists. The miners' sons and daughters now work happily behind the counters of fish and chip shops, gift shops, museums, pubs and guest houses. Here, for all I know, is where a boy called John Arthur really did spend his adolescence. Here is

where his father William died in a pit accident in 1911. There is, after all, a tombstone in the pretty local churchyard with his name on it.

By Dickensian twists and turns, John Arthur was adopted by an aunt who also happened, for reasons which are never fully explained, to live in Raughton. Mrs. Framley is still with us. White-haired and soft-voiced, full of country wisdom, she remains just about the only proper link with the John Arthur's childhood.

At the age of 15, John Arthur went down the pit. At 18, he was working the roads. At 20, he went to night school in Nottingham. At 23, war intervened. John Arthur, by his own admission, was intense and argumentative. He wouldn't have stood a chance in a peacetime army, but in war, in the mud, with real shells and bullets flying, people would have respected him. Uninterested in promotion, he would have been exactly the kind of squaddie whom the officers looked upon to take the lead. He was wounded first in Flanders in 1915, and then again and more seriously at the Somme. Back at the Front by mid 1917, finally promoted corporal, he famously won the George Cross at Ypres, yet somehow survived that and the confusion of defeat to return to England with his life and limbs intact.

By the agreed figures, John Arthur would have been 27 by then. The country was tired and run down. There were no jobs for him and his like to return to. After the fall of Lloyd George in the autumn of 1918, Baldwin's weak coalition was the first of several enfeebled minority Governments. But, after the heroism, career-hopping and misty-eyed wandering, it is in these early post-War years that we glimpse the first undoubtedly true picture of John Arthur. He stands thin and bare-chested in a boxing ring with his hands raised, a useful light-weight boxer. After the hazy images and fairy glade woodcuts, the face is unmistakably his as it stares out white-lit from grainy newsprint photos, surprised in victory, his ribs and belly sculpted, Christlike. Did he fight bare-knuckle as well? Did he do the fairs and bear-pits? Did he take backhanders for an easy fall? I think that, as a canny lad who was clearly in need of the money, the answer is probably yes. John Arthur was, by all accounts, a quick, ferocious fighter. Not that good technically (he started too late) but hard to beat, controlled and yet driven. His trade probably took him abroad—some travelling show—as I doubt if he had any ties. You can see him wandering amid the circus tents

pitched in some field outside Paris, the scents and the stirrings of the caged lions and elephants…

There I go. It's almost impossible not to be swallowed up by the myth of John Arthur. But then, the myth probably tells us more about the man than the truth ever could. I'm starting to wonder, in fact, if the truth is ever worth telling.

One evening, my college principal Cumbernald comes to my rooms unasked. He stretches out in one of the two chairs facing the fireplace and companionably beckons me to join him in the other.

"Sorry to hear you've been ill," he says. "Nothing serious, I hope."

"It's really just a recurrence of the thing I had before."

"Hmmm…"

Cumbernald steeples his fingers. I wait for him to say more.

"Well, that's good. Problem with Scotland is the damn rain. Worse than Oxford. Still, a holiday's a holiday…"

"I imagine Tuscany was a little different."

"Quite marvellous, actually." He smiles at the memory. Cumbernald was brown before he went. Now, he runs the risk of being mistaken for an Indian—which is not to be taken lightly these days. "Can't say I'm glad to be back."

I study him as he brings me up to date with what's been going on here at college, which is all the usual back-biting midsummer rubbish.

"So we'll fade out most of the stuff about the French Revolution. *Definitely* no question in Mods this year…"

Faced with the body of an actual human adult male, my resolution to kill John Arthur seems less simple. People are such big beasts when you look at them—Cumbernald probably weighs as much as a stag. Poison, even as Cumbernald sips the tea I've poured him, would be technical and messy even if I were able to get hold of the necessary chemicals. And a bomb requires know-how, the help of an experienced group. A knife appeals to me because of its simplicity and theatricality—I've always had a soft spot for Charlotte Corday—but I'm not even very good at carving chicken. Or I could use a gun.

"—by the way," I say, interrupting, "you'll have to do without me for the first week or so of Michaelmas."

Bang bang. Scurrying KSG officers. The salty drift of cordite and smoke. Not Charlotte Corday as she plunged her knife into Marat whilst he bathed, but Gavrilo Princip and the Archduke Ferdinand, John Wilkes Booth and Lincoln.

"Oh really, Brook? Well, as you know we're quite generous with time *out* of term. So I'm not sure that—"

"—I have a personal invitation to the Trafalgar Day celebrations from John Arthur." I reach for the wad of papers that arrived soon after his letter with detailed itineraries, a gold-leaf embossed invitation, confirmation of four days booked at the New Dorchester. "Of course, the actual day itself is also his fiftieth birthday…"

"Yes? Indeed…" Cumbernald studies the papers. He swallows audibly as he hands them back. "I'm sure that we can manage without you for a week or so, Brook. In fact, I'm certain you'll have a splendid time. No problem. No problem at all."

He stands up, laying a hand on my shoulder before I can pull away. "But you're *still* looking a bit peaky. My theory is that with all the stresses and strains of Varsity life these days, one holiday in a summer simply isn't enough. To be honest, I find the Italians rather greasy…" His fingers squeeze my thin flesh as he gazes at me. "So Eileen and the children and I, we have a chalet at this place outside Ross on Wye. It's very clean, very friendly, very smart. All very modern. We're always saying there's room enough to fit in at least one *interesting* guest. Anyway, we get bored on our own—married life, you know… So I was wondering, Brook… I've been meaning to ask… If you might not fancy…?"

Walter Bracken is also back from a summer holiday of sorts, which consisted of trudging up and down various hills in the Lake District in dubbined boots. There, apparently, even on this of all summers, it's been raining. His sister came around to my rooms one morning to advise me of his return, picking up things and laying them down again as if looking for dust whilst she reminded me of my promise to be a friend to him—especially as she's off to York for a few weeks.

I'm more than happy to agree: now that my plans have begun to crystallise, I'd be glad for any excuse to contact Bracken. When I speak to

him on the phone, he suggests we meet at his college, but I steer him back towards the cottage at Old Marston, and that long shed.

As we sit playing cribbage in the nearby Bricklayers Arms, Bracken seems pale, quieter and glummer than ever. Perhaps, I think, he really does share my vice, my curse, my attraction. Perhaps in some other world, in some different time and place, he and I might have found ways of physically consoling each other. But this is here. This is now. When I mention I'm going to London in October, he tells me I should visit the Shot Tower at Woolwich before they pull it down, then shakes his head and splits a matchstick with his thumbnail as if struck by a sense of pointlessness.

"Has your principal been on to you about this project of ours?" he asks eventually.

"Not really. Has yours?"

"I think that's probably an end to it. Anyway, I won't be around for much longer…" He suddenly sinks his pint. "I've been asked to move. Well, asked isn't quite the right word."

"Is it what you were saying before? This thing in Australia?"

"Basically…" He suppresses a belch. "Yes."

"That can't be so bad, can it?"

He gives me a look, then trips on my walking stick as he heads off to get us both another pint of lukewarm Wadworths.

"What does this mean for your other work?" I ask, steering him back from the glum silence that has descended over us a pint or so later, and deeply conscious of the weight that I'm carrying in my inside jacket pocket. "The Humane Bullet."

"That's nearly done."

"Can I take a look? I mean, this afternoon…"

He shrugs, rocking the table with his big body, half-spilling his beer. For our own separate reasons, we both seem to be intent on getting slightly drunk today.

"Let's go then, shall we?"

I follow him out. After the darkness of the bar, it's a surprise to return to this summer afternoon where the air is specked with tiny black flies disturbed by the harvest and an informal cricket match is in progress on a field beside St Nicholas's church. *No run!* Mannish laugher. The rap of wood on leather.

The cottage is in the kind of mess I'd imagined Bracken would create in Ursula's absence. There are socks strewn in the hall, and an uneaten lump of bacon lies glued to the frying pan in the kitchen. As he opens the back door, I notice a stack of unopened long brown envelopes stuffed beside a dead begonia on the window ledge. HMSO. One of them looks like a telegram.

Still, I admire his blank gaze as he adjusts the gun vice in the long shed with his warty hands, then drags a piece of pig out from the fridge. After all the vagaries of history, I envy the certainties of his graphs and figures.

"I hope you don't mind me saying this," I begin, "but I still don't understand what your objection is to taking this new job. After all, Oxford these days really isn't the place for someone who's interested in facts."

He pulls a wire he's rigged up now to work from a longer distance. *Blam.* The blue pig at the far end rocks back and forth. The teletypes chatter.

"I suppose," he says, "that you imagine one device for killing people is much like another? You think this work here is bad enough, so I really shouldn't have any problem with doing something similar? After all, that's what we scientists are about, isn't it? Making bigger bombs. Look at Alfred Nobel…"

I gaze back at him through the smoke, my ears still ringing from the shot. "I just don't understand what you're afraid of."

"The future, I suppose."

"It's there, anyway, though, isn't it? Whatever it is, it's waiting for somebody to take hold of it."

"I used to think that," Bracken says, writing numbers as he speaks, then suddenly pressing his pencil down hard enough to splinter the tip. "I used to believe that my work with the Humane Bullet was something someone else would do anyway even if I didn't. It's the prostitute's old excuse…"

"You don't see it like that now?"

He gives the paper one last jagged dot. "The Humane Bullet is new research as far as I can tell. It's all been battle reports and autopsies before now. And it's there, I've found the Humane Bullet—a thousand different ones, anyway. And at the moment, I'm really the only person who

understands what it is. Of course, I have to file reports with assessors and the War Office to justify the grants, but that's just paperwork. Nobody reads them. Now I've done it, now it's there, I can't help wondering if there isn't some way to unmake it."

Silence hangs between us. Even the pigeons on the roof have stopped cooing.

"Of course," he adds, clattering around in his toolbox. "That's probably unlikely…"

The afternoon slips by, and I begin to get a headache from the noise and the bad air and too much lunchtime beer. As the smoke finally starts to clear and he begins to sweep up the cartridges, I know that I must seize my moment.

"I haven't been too well lately," I say—I think—carelessly enough. But Bracken immediately stops and looks at me from over the handle of his broom. In the few long bands of afternoon sunlight that penetrate the room, with the ghosts of smoke, the deep brown shadows, the spoiled carcasses, the gleam of the cartridges and the grey of gunmetal, the scene already has a monumental quality. A painting that schoolchildren might look at on a day trip to the art gallery in some changed future. BROOK AND BRACKEN DISCUSS THE DEATH OF JOHN ARTHUR.

"The fact of the matter is, ah, Walter, that I'm dying. Hence this cough. Hence this bloody walking stick. It's lung cancer, and it's inoperable. I still don't feel too bad really, all things considered. As long as I take the tablets…"

The few flies that have found their way into the shed have settled on the spoiled meat in busy silence. Outside, the pigeons are cooing again, the sparrows are rattling their feet on the roof. I can even hear faint shouts as the cricket match over on the green comes to its rowdy conclusion.

"But when my time comes," I continue, "there's no pretending it'll be anything less than ugly." Reaching into my pocket—slowly, deliberately, the way people to do in films—I produce Francis's pistol. "I'd like to be in control of my own destiny," I say as I begin to unwrap it from a grubby handkerchief. "There was a friend of mine. He died in the War. This came back as part of his belongings…"

I'd planned to say more, to concoct a story about how fitting it would be for me to kill myself with this particular weapon. And I'd expected some

reaction. That—I don't know—he'd be shocked, or knowing. That he'd care, or that he wouldn't care. That, even, we might even hug, touch, if only briefly, and share our weary male humanity. But at this point Bracken simply leans his broom against the wall and takes the pistol from me. Metal clicks on metal as he spins out the wheel and inspects the barrel. His gaze is intent. Scientific.

"This hasn't been used for a long time…" he says. "I'll need to clean it."

I watch in silence as he goes about wiping and rodding and oiling the pistol as simply as if it were just some bit of a car or a vacuum cleaner. Then he selects a brown box of cartridges, loads it, and places it in the vice facing the pig.

Blam blam blam blam blam

Even muffled by the lead-lined blanket he's thrown over it, the air rings as he jerks the trigger wire. Startled flies cloud around the swaying meat.

"This is a Webley .45 Bulldog Revolver," he says as he removes the pistol and cleans it again. "It's pre-War. You probably noticed how it pulled off to the left, but it's still in serviceable condition." *Click.* "This is the catch. It's a double-action, which means you can either pull the trigger all the way back like this." *Click.* "Or you cock the hammer first and then squeeze. It's a lot easier, if you're not used to firearms, to cock it first. Otherwise there's quite a lot of pressure on the trigger and you risk lifting the barrel up from the target." *Click.* "Like that. Here…"

He shows me how to use the rod beneath the barrel to clear spent cartridges. Then, so intent that it's him rather than the gun that now scares me, he makes me load the thing, and stand half-way down the cage, and hold it out, and aim at the blue pig and pull the trigger. Suddenly alive, the pistol tries to leap out of my sweaty palms, but by the fourth shot, the sensation of it going off is surprisingly ordinary. Guns, after all, are simply well-crafted bits of metal; it's we humans who are strange and dangerous. Then he gives me a small box of cartridges. I count ten inside it.

"These are quite long. 200 grain. Snub-nosed, so they won't travel as far as the ones you've just been firing, and they're less accurate. But they're especially, ah…"

I nod. He means lethal.

“You really must keep it locked away, Brook.”

I stare at Walter Bracken for a moment, still waiting for him to tell me that I should just hand the pistol back to him, and forget about ever using it. Still stupidly waiting for that touch, that sharedness, or for something to snap, for reality to intervene between me and my plans; for something to go wrong. But his gaze remains distant.

“I, ah, don’t know quite how to say this,” I begin eventually. “But when the time comes, I don’t want you to be implicated. You know. There’s bound to be some kind of inquest…”

“That’s alright,” he says, turning away from me as be begins to lock up. “I’ll be gone by then. The way things are now, I really don’t feel as though there’s any point in my resisting.”

I’m suddenly frail, damp, weak. Almost post-coital. The scene has lost all sense of monumentality. I need to get away.

12

EGGS AND BACON, EGGS and Bacon, Apple and Custard, Apple and Custard, Cheese and Biscuits, Cheese and Biscuits, Fish and Chips, Fish and Chips…

Making piston-movements with their elbows, going faster and faster, Cumbernald's two daughters are pretending the car's a train as we bowl along the A40 towards Wales and Gloucester. I'm seated between them, in the middle of the back seat so that they can both get most of the fresh air that's pouring in through the side windows. "They do both tend to get a bit travel-sick," Eileen Cumbernald warned me when we set out. "Just give me a shout if you see either of them turning green…"

We stop for lunch at one of the big new roadhouse inns. Cumbernald buys us all steak and chips, and the children's portions come with free ice cream. Christine's their eldest at eleven; a plump pre-adolescent with dental braces who is designated *clever* and *reads a lot.* Barbara's seven, thinner, more self-assured and "sporty". Back in the afternoon heat of the car, we head on amid the lorries and late-August holiday makers. Cumbernald drives a Daimler 25/40, a shining but old-fashioned-looking vehicle that came as a surprise when I saw it until climbed inside and breathed in all the waxed wood, the Axminster and the leather. Much like their tall white house on elm-lined Raglan Street—although there's also a modern-looking Jowett Jupiter parked in the drive; what Eileen Cumbernald calls "Mummy's taxi"—it's a statement about the timelessness of class.

Most of the A40 has been improved to dual-carriageway and looking out across the rolling heat-hazed concrete, the scenery beyond seems distant and arid, framed by white gravel and spindly new trees. Cumbernald clicks on the radio, then he and Eileen argue about whether they want to listen to the Light or the Third Programme. Brief but jumbled snatches of Vera Lynn, static and Tchaikovsky roar out from the loudspeakers—it's like the avant-garde European music they'd be so quick to condemn—whilst Christine and Barbara grow listless and bored. Studying them carefully for traces of green, I decide to distract them by describing what their lives would have been like at other times in history.

“If you two little girls lived in Roman times, you might have had lots of slaves and servants and central heating.”

“We *do* have central heating.”

“And lots of slaves and servants.”

“They’re just people who come to help Mummy, stupid.”

“Anyway, we’re *not* little girls.”

But they soak it up with surprising interest.

“And what happened to people when they died?” Barbara asks me sweetly. “Did they eat them?”

It’s really quite fun. When we finally turn off at a sign that points north towards Leominster and Hereford onto winding, prettier roads, Barbara leans close to me, dragging my head down with her hot arms to whisper that she likes me because I remind her of her dead Uncle Freddie when she saw him in the coffin.

The place to which the Cumbernalds have invited me lies deep within the Forest of Dean. Deciding to try a new route amid the seemingly few roads, we end up having to reverse for miles to give way to a tree-hauling tractor, and it seems later than it really is in the shade of these pines when we finally arrive at the entrance, which is contradictorily signed, in green and gold, PENRHOS PARK—TOURERS WELCOME—BY APPOINTMENT ONLY, and sports the crowns and stars of various tourist classifications like campaign medals.

The Daimler whispers past the laurel hedges to a glassed hut where a uniformed man waves us on without bothering to check our passes. Cumbernald raises a gracious hand. In the back, Christine and Barbara stick out their tongues and pull faces.

“*Now* we can relax,” Cumbernald says as he crooks his arm on the open window and starts humming.

The lodge, clad with logs like some fairy tale woodsman’s cottage, is set in a grassy clearing. The evening air smells like nectar even to my dim senses as I claw my limbs out of the Daimler.

“*This* is home, isn’t it?” Cumbernald says, puffing his chest. “Greater Britain! Better than Italy any day…”

My room at the back of the lodge smells of new wood. The bed is undented—has probably never been slept on—and the sliding doors of the

fitted wardrobes still have the builder's instructions stuck on the back. Eileen Cumbernald comes in before I've even had time to open my suitcase, changed already from her sleeveless summer dress into shorts and a halter top from which the fatty sides of her breasts look ready to fall out.

"I do hope the girls were alright with you there at the back," she says as she reaches to open the window. Evening birdsong floods in.

"I quite enjoyed it actually."

"That's the spirit…" She smiles, thinking about saying more. I smile back.

"You must love it here."

"Oh, we do! But, ah…" She pushes back her blond hair, the roots of which are darker. "I know it's a bit late to say this, but I hope you don't feel you have to come just because Eric's your boss."

"It'll do me good."

She frowns, pursing her lips. "What I'm trying to say is that you're free to do what you like. Shall I help you with your case?"

"It's alright, I—"

She lifts it up onto the bed anyway. "This is heavy. One of those lovely old ones that last forever. Not like the cheap modern things. But what *have* you got in here? Books, I suppose—I know you academics…"

That evening, Cumbernald—or Eric, as I may now have to start thinking of him—prepares the dinner for us out-of-doors using a crude iron device filled with charcoal. It's an American idea, he tells me as I duck the spiralling smoke. One of their few good ones. There's white wine from the fridge and salad tossed in a Pyrex bowl and rolls and the new ready-salted Smiths' Crisps that come without the little blue bag inside the packet.

Christine and Barbara pedal off along the paths between the trees on the bicycles they keep here, half-blackened sausages gripped like cigars between their teeth. Looking over the forest crown, I see the smoke of other cooking fires rising like Indian signals. As it gets darker, Eileen sets a lantern on the outdoor table where we've eaten, and we watch the moths flutter into oblivion on its hot glass. Away from Oxford and his suit, Cumbernald looks pleasingly ridiculous in sandals, baggy shorts, a Fred Perry top, a charcoal smudge across his forehead.

The children finally return out of the night, flushed and bright. When I look at my watch, I see that it's already nearly eleven. After the commotion of their late bath has diminished to a few odd shrieks indoors, I decide it's time that I also went to bed.

"You look a better man already," Cumbernald says, wine glass in his lap. "Eileen tells me you've brought lots of books—so just do what you like tomorrow. This is some place, though, isn't it, eh? A real breath of England."

He gestures around. It's suddenly night-quiet, with the faint stirring of the pines, the distant hoot of an owl. It wouldn't take much imagination to hear the growl of a bear, the rooting chuff of a wild boar, the howl of wolves—the return of all the beasts of old to the vast Wood of Albion.

I'm about to say that—or something like it—when I hear a thin shriek. The sound is so strange here, yet so familiar as it grows louder, that it takes me a moment to realise that all I'm hearing is the passing of a train.

"It's just a goods line," Cumbernald explains as it goes by unseen, not far behind the lodge. "Never quite worked out where it's from or to. But I shouldn't worry, old chap. That's the latest I've ever heard one go by. They won't disturb your sleep."

In the morning, the girls career down on their bikes to buy breakfast from the site shop. *Eggs and Bacon*, *Eggs and Bacon*… The sound of sizzling mingles in my head with the clack and roar of the trains that fractured my night as Eileen, back in her traditional role now the cooking's indoors, prepares our fry-up.

Sitting blinking in the yellow and pine kitchen, I'm complimented on looking better, and it's obvious from their faces, their voices, from the way they're swallowing gallons of orange juice and coffee, that the Cumbernalds slept like logs.

"I was thinking we could go down to the Sun Area this morning," Cumbernald says, flapping out a copy of the *Times.* There's a photograph above the page-fold of John Arthur shaking hands with Roosevelt. My Modernist books tell me that even lesser dignities are never searched before they come face to face with the great man.

"The Sun Area today. That okay with you, Brook?"

"Oh? Yes. Fine…"

The girls, for some reason, both start to giggle until orange juice dribbles out of their noses.

Penrhos Park is much bigger than I imagined. Not only is there a shop, but a whole central complex where the children can play table tennis and outdoor chess, watch television in a big dark room, slide around on the parquet of the dance hall, or splash and scream at each other within the giant fishbowl of the indoor pool.

The atmosphere is cosmopolitan. I detect a surprising number of American accents. Not long ago, Greater Britain was regarded as unstable, racist, a powder-keg, an international pariah. But these things never last. Now that Soviet Russia has been revealed as the grey and uninspiring place it always was, Britain has become the greatest object of international fascination. What Modernist Britain does today, so the saying goes, the rest of the world will do tomorrow. Look at our cars, our roads, our televisions, our politics—look at places like this! Everybody wants to come so that they can tell their friends back in Philadelphia or Baden-Baden, even if they still feel a little afraid.

The Sun Area is lavishly signposted, yet still requires a long trek down through the tents and the trees. Eileen Cumbernald struggles with a canvas bag whilst the girls skip ahead and husband Eric manfully carries his *Times.* I limp behind on my walking stick in an open-neck shirt and hot woollen trousers.

“Don’t mind the sun, do you, ah, Geoffrey?” he asks me from beneath his Panama. “You’re not sensitive?”

“No… Not at all…”

The Sun Area is shielded by high hedges and long walls which we must walk around, then queue at a turnstile. The swing doors beyond lead to a hot wooden tunnel lined with benches: some kind of changing area. Eileen Cumbernald removes the same halter top she wore yesterday evening and hangs it on a numbered peg. She isn’t wearing a bra. Cumbernald, contrarily, removes his shorts and his baggy y-fonts before taking off his sandals. The children, by some instantaneous process, are already naked. They scamper off down the smooth wooden floor towards the bright square of light at the far end, fading into thin outlines, then skeletons, then nothing at all. It’s as if they’ve been swallowed by the sun.

Cumbernald really *is* brown. He must do this sort of thing all the time. Eileen is too; although I can see now that she's not as blond as she pretends to be.

"You okay, Brook? You can take your walking stick with you if you like. Or just leave it behind. Nothing ever gets stolen."

I undo a few token buttons of my shirt, wondering how easy it would be to wake up if I pinched myself. *The most amazing dream. I was with the college principal and his wife. They took all their clothes off, then asked me to do the same…*

"I'll get you a sun-vest," Eileen says, and strides off into the sunlight herself, dimpled buttocks jiggling.

"Can't beat this for an experience," Cumbernald says, slapping bits of himself. "They say John Arthur does it. Of course, Jim Toller—*fascinating* article by him in last month's *H&E*…"

I nod. I'd slump down on the bench, but for the unfortunate level that it would bring my gaze to. Cumbernald's saggy in the way that all middle-aged men are, although in good enough shape. No surplus fat. I think of Bracken's blue pigs. *Blam*, *blam.* People are such big beasts. The light from the frosted window shines on the sloughs of skin beneath his ribs.

"There we are," says Eileen, returning with an off-white ball of cotton scrunched up in her hands. She's still wearing her earrings, I notice. And her wedding ring. The puckered scar from some abdominal operation smiles lopsidedly back at me. "A sun vest. On a hot day like this, it'll help to stop you burning. Come on, Eric—don't need our help, do you, Geoffrey? No. We'll just be outside at the cafe. Shall I get you an ice cream…?"

A truly hot day at the honeyed edge of August, here on this Summer Isle. The people stroll about, shining with oil. They play sports and eat simple food and dispose considerately of their litter. Different ages and shapes, lumpy or skinny, effortlessly young and effortlessly beautiful, breathtakingly ugly, shrivelled and brown, or white, stooped and cadaverous like me—amputees, even—they all talk, walk, smile, shade their eyes to look up at the hot bright dot of the sun as they wonder once again at the goodness of this feeling, the goodness of this weather, the goodness of this place where we happen to find ourselves.

Having promised to keep an eye on the children, I sit by the lake with a copy of something called *Future Past* whilst Cumbernald and Eileen go off to rustle up a team for the volleyball. No one seems to mind my wearing a sun vest, and I'm as naked as the rest of them underneath. The white sand along this lakeside looks natural, but must have been carted in by the lorry-load. The water is impossibly dark, impossibly bright. Bodies crash in and out, sleek as otters. A woman breastfeeds her child on the towel next-door to mine, engaging me in snatches of conversation. Out in the distance, white sails are turning.

Occasionally, I glimpse Christine and Barbara. There's a lido that juts into the lake beside the trees. At this moment, Barbara is hanging onto the bottom of the low diving board there whilst Christine jumps up and down on top of it. A young Adonis strides by at the water's edge. There's barely any hair on his body. Amid all this display, his genitals are disappointing—a small afterthought, but then sex seems a remote abstraction here. It really is true what they say; people in the nude are impossibly decent. We should all go around like this. It would probably be the answer to all this world's troubles. I can see it now—*Naturism—A New Theory Of World History*… The only trouble is, I have a feeling that it was one of the titles I drew the line at when I was stocking up for my researches in Blackwells.

Christine and Barbara have vanished again. I squint at the pages of my book and wiggle my toes into the hot sand. *Chapter Five. The Greatness of the British Heritage—Truth or Myth?* I can feel my sweat prickling beneath my sun vest. Looking around to see if anyone's -watching me—unlikely possibility—I drag it off and the moist shock of the air passes over all of me. It's strangely exhilarating, and my skin feels closer to the sun as I lay back on the towel and let the pages of *Future Past splay* unread in the sand. I'm part of the water, the air, the shouts and the cries…

I wake up to the odd sensation of being naked, and a cool shock of water. Christine gives a gap-toothed grin as she uncups the rest of her dripping hands over me. Barbara's giggling. Cumbernald and Eileen are standing a little way back on the beach, towels draped over their shoulders.

"You look a little red if you don't mind me saying so, Brook. Better have some of this sun oil…" says my college principal, stooping down and whistling faintly through his teeth as he proceeds to oil my back.

Noon comes and goes. The afternoon glides by. I go for a swim, leaving a rainbowed slick of sun oil in my wake like a leaky trawler. I eat ice cream and a Melton Mowbray pork pie. I drink gallons of Vimto. I let Christine and Barbara bury me in the sand. I take another swim. Eileen helps me with more of the sun oil, and I reflect on the way that women's breasts hang down like udders when they're on all fours. I suppose they *are* udders really when you come to think about it. And they have this clever knack of keeping their genitalia well out of sight even when they're naked. Men are such show-offs… By evening, when cooler air comes rippling the lake, my skin is itchy as we grab our few belongings and head back up the slope to the changing rooms. The hot water burns like molten lava on my shoulders as I splash around in the white-tiled communal showers, and my prick, I can't help noticing, looks a bit like one of Cumbernald's barbecued sausages; cooked on just the one side. My clothes feel like sandpaper.

That night, as, glazed in minty unguents, I shiver and roast beneath the one sheet I can bare to have covering me, the trains are busy again, clanking chains and couplings, hissing brakes as they trundle back and forth. Then a creak of springs comes through the lodge's thin walls as the Cumbernalds indulge in their own bit of coupling. And there are children's cries, too; the clatter of the showers from which they emerge like drowned figures with their hair lank, thinly naked as they walk on to be swallowed in the bright blaze of light…

At three o-clock, feeling stiff and nauseous, I wrap myself in the sticky sheet and hobble to the toilet. Once I've relieved myself and decided that I'm not going to vomit after all, I pad through the dim parlour to the French doors. Silvery night lies over the trees outside in the clearing, and the air as the doors break open silently smells of pine and pollen and dew. The stars are out in amazing profusion. And I can hear the breath, like a great animal sighing, of the train that must be waiting almost directly behind the lodge. Barefoot, wrapped in my crumpled shroud, stung by nettles, I wander towards it.

A bank and then a line of trees separate the lodge from the railway line. Once you're close, it's funny that you can't see more of it, but then the final chain-link fence is engulfed in ivy. I don't know what I'd expected to find, but it's just some goods train as Cumbernald predicted. The huge engine sighs in impatience as it waits for a signal to change. The fireman's

face is lined red as he leans from the footplate, whilst the driver waits at the track side, smoking a cigarette and kicking at the gravel. The engine is high and vast; black, nameless, numberless.

Finally, the driver checks his two watches and climbs back up. The tracks wheeze as the great piston elbows of the engine begin to slide. The wheels slip as they take up the tension, then squeal and grip and begin to move, hauling at the vast burden that stretches behind into the night. The goods wagons are endless, open-backed, covered in mottled camouflage. Here and there the tarpaulin has slipped back or been roped down less thoughtfully, and it's easy as they clack past to make out the huge outlined bodies of bombers, their wings plucked from them as if by some cruel boy. *Eggs and Bacon, Eggs and Bacon, Apple and Custard, Apple and Custard, Cheese and Biscuits, Cheese and Biscuits, Fish and Chips, Fish and Chips*… I watch them jolt and rumble. It seems like fully a mile of wagons go by before the red light of the guard's van finally disappears south.

I pick my way back through the wet undergrowth, then across the grass. The lodge is quiet as I click on the light in my room and sit down at the dressing table. Balancing my weight on the least-burnt of my buttocks, hearing nothing now but the quiet of the night and the faint sound of my hosts snoring, I open my books and set to work.

I have a theory that the decision to enter politics tells you far more about someone's nature than their choice of party. Politicians as a race have much in common—as shown by the bonhomie with which John Arthur can greet figures as diverse as Franco, Stalin, and now even Roosevelt.

As an ex-boxer, an ex-corporal, a leader of small groups of men used to the harsh decisions and horrors of war, John Arthur would have been well equipped to make his mark in the strange and violent world of 1920s fringe politics. It's on record that he moved to London in 1922 and lived in a cheap boarding house in Balham (now another museum). There, jobless and without food, he almost died of pneumonia. I see him emerging from the chrysalis of fever with boxing and the War and the rest of his life put firmly behind him. At last he truly is John Arthur.

Everyone in Britain knew we'd been treated harshly after the War. There was a sense after the Treaty of Versailles that the French and the Germans, although recent enemies, had plotted to destroy our Empire. Why,

otherwise, were Syria, Iraq, Palestine, the Sudan, Rhodesia, Nigeria, Cyprus —admittedly places that most Britons were only aware of as part of the reassuring pinkness on the maps they'd seen on school walls—made into protectorates of Wilson's new League of Nations, to be policed by virtually anyone but the British until they were deemed ready for self determination?

This hurt was the one thing that united Britain. True, we still had South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and India, even the Falkland Isles. But with the exception of India, these were white nations, and all had suffered at least as badly as Britain in the War.

In Italy, Il Duce was already in power, building Romanesque temples and thumping his chest from balconies, whilst John Arthur was still trying to make his voice heard in the corners of East End bars. For Britain, as South Africa plunged into civil war and the Russians expanded across Afghanistan towards the Indian border, there were only other losses to face, and then one final crushing humiliation. In 1923, with the open support of many United States congressmen, the Irish Republicans defeated the British forces street by street in Dublin, then savaged them again as they withdrew north. The notorious terrorist De Valera became head of a new Irish Government.

Nothing seemed to have much value then. Britain's economy was wrecked by the War and the reparations payments. Demoralised, we were drawn into the terrible spiral of hyper-inflation. Fresh coinage was issued: one new pound for every hundred old. Within weeks, everyone was saying it should have been a thousand. I too went hungry; I queued outside the grocers for £10 then £50 and then £100 worth of rotten cabbage as General Election followed General Election and MacDonald succeeded Baldwin and then Baldwin took over again. Bevin gained ascendancy in the Labour Party, but was never able to control the anger of the workers he supposedly represented, and the succession of General Strikes in the early twenties finally brought about the dissolution of the liberal left. India was in famine. There were street-battles and demonstrations. One man in three was said to have a job.

The fringe parties, not just the extreme right and left, but religious fundamentalists, eurhythmic dancers, gurus and back-to-naturists, were loud, colourful and often very violent, although most people had little time for them: there was simply too much disillusionment. When Churchill took

power during the Third General Strike of 1924–5 and succeeded in defeating the miners and the train drivers, then issued a Guaranteed Pound that people somehow actually believed in, it seemed as though the worst of Britain's post-War nightmare might soon be over.

But money was still short. There was still high unemployment. The Communists and the Fascists didn't go away. Neither did the reparations payments, the feeling of defeat, the whole sense of national crisis which Churchill was often so good at exploiting. We were weak. In this new world order, Britain was a third-rate nation; a little island off a big continent, like Tierra del Fuego, Ceylon, Madagascar.

I saw John Arthur once at that time—a privilege so many people claim nowadays that a meeting of them would fill Wembley Stadium. I was still working as a teacher at Lichfield Grammar, although often there weren't enough books, enough children, enough coal for the boiler in winter—enough chalk, even—and we had to subsist on credits and half pay. Still, I was lucky to have a job, and to own a house.

I was aware by then of the various bus stops and bushes which the lonely men of Lichfield would sometimes frequent. But I also knew about police entrapment, the shaming articles in the *Lichfield Mercury* that were so often followed by the suicide of those named, the long prison terms, and the beating and truncheon-buggerings that generally accompanied a night in the cells. I feared the loss of my life and my job, but I was also possessed by a deep erotic longing. Of course, I could have tried to honour Francis's memory by seeking someone I cared about and might eventually have learned to love. Instead, as the twenties progressed from the time of the £500 haddock and wheelbarrow money into Churchill's empty pontificating, I became a regular weekend visitor to London.

There, under the County Fire Office arches at Piccadilly, in the urinals at Victoria and South Kensington Stations, in small side streets like Falconbury Mews, and sometimes beneath the summer skies on Hampstead Heath, I would consent to suck off some merchant sailor—or, if there happened to be a gang of them, more likely be repeatedly and painfully buggered. But the bruises and the indignities seemed a necessary part of the process. From Francis, I had taken the turn that many inverts take once love has failed them, which is to remove the holy power from sex by making it a means of humiliation, parody, loss of self, comedy, degradation.

Thus I spent my middle years. Once, wandering near midnight in an area of East End dockland houses that the police had long given up policing, I crossed the scattered cobbles towards the gaslit clamour of an end-of-terrace pub. The place stank of men and sweat, of cheap beer and piss. Immediately, I felt at home. Just half an hour before, I had been on all fours on a fire-blackened wasteground, half-choking as a fist twisted the back of my collar and a voice hissed *fucking queer Jesus God you fucking queer bastards you make me fucking fucking sick* whilst, unlubricated, he forced himself into me. It was called the Cottage Spring, and was one of those pubs where people who barely knew each other could congregate and yell. Dry-throated, I made my way towards the bar, but then had to give up as I was pushed and shouldered. There was a sense, I realised, that something was about to happen. A general clearing of throats, a falling of relative silence. It seemed likely to me that some local housewife was about to step onto a couple of pushed-together tables, remove her clothing and do whatever else was expected of her in return for cash in a pint pot. I still hadn't realised then that there were political pubs, and that the Cottage Spring was a Fascist one.

Those were restless, anxious nights in the East End. By then, the Poles, White Russians and Lithuanian Jews who'd come to settle here in the War's aftermath had fled their burnt-out houses. Yet, so obsessed was I with my own sexual pursuits that I hadn't realised the many other kinds of risk I was taking by wandering these areas. And I was slow to detect, in this humming crowded pub, the palpable air of violence. One man stood up on a table, raised his hands and attempted to speak, then was dragged down and buried in a rain of blows. Someone with a smashed and bleeding nose pushed past me.

I had stumbled into the vortex of something very dangerous. No one had noticed me when I came in—I was already ragged enough to look the part—but I was sure that they would notice me now if I tried to leave. There was a stir at the pub's far corner at the end of some oddly light and careless snatch of song: a perceptible shifting of mood. I glanced at the man nearest me and saw that his lips were moving along with those of many others. A whispered name, barely audible at first, but slowly shaping, becoming clearer, was filling the air. He clambered up on the bar, then, did this man they were all calling for. He stood above all the grubby crudely shaved

necks in a frayed shirt that was too big for him, a leather waistcoat that was losing its stitching, a pair of moleskin trousers and a thick miner's belt. His face looked pale and his hands were stained with mud or blood, yet he managed to keep an easy dignity as he balanced there with the dusty rows of glasses stacked behind him. He raised his arms and smiled as he looked down, stilling us. Although he had changed much in the fifteen years since I had last seen him, it was that smile that finally made me certain. I was sure that this man—this John Arthur they were calling for—was in fact Francis Eveleigh.

But this wasn't *my* Francis, I knew that about him straight away, too. He'd changed in all the ways that men do as they get older (although he still looked achingly young). There were fine lines around his eyes. His mouth was thinner. Grey was already frosting his hair. But he'd also changed more fundamentally—it was as if something about him had been lost, or perhaps added or replaced. To this day, I'm still not sure what it is.

I didn't wave my arms and cry out, *Here, Francis, it's me, Griff. Your long-lost lover!* I didn't even try to meet his eyes. Instead, I backed slowly towards a large pillar at the far end of the bar as others pushed forward to get nearer him. I hid myself from his gaze.

They called themselves Saint George's Men then. Earlier that night they had clearly been involved in some kind of street battle, hence the nail-studded clubs and the spiked banners that leaned by the door. But the whole thing, whilst not perhaps a defeat, had clearly been unsatisfactory. They were still revved up, full of blood and passion.

When Francis—when *John Arthur*—climbed up onto that bar and smiled and raised his hands and began to speak in that changed soft Yorkshire accent of his, I already sensed many of the feelings that this whole nation was to become familiar with in the years to come. A kind of open-mouthed yearning, an almost sexual need for reassurance, love, comfort that you sensed only this one man could ever bring. After the confusions and disappointments of their lives, these poor and jobless men were desperate to be told that, yes, it was all quite simple. Alone, without compromise, as nothing more than what they already were, they could seize power. They could change history.

He's refined his technique in all the years since, has John Arthur, and I was in no state on that particular night to absorb much of what he said.

Nevertheless, his performance was essentially the same as those he's done since outside 10 Downing Street, from the steps of New Buckingham Palace and on the nation's television screens. That initial pause. The sharing, self-mocking smile that tells us that he still doesn't understand why it has to be *him*. Then a mild joke and a few more gentle comments. At this point, the crowd is relaxing, smiling back at him; at the Cottage Spring, there even began a background murmuring, so that he had to lift his hands again to still them. By then, you're expecting the whole speech to be nothing more than a calming chat, but suddenly, one of the anecdotes will twist around to some moment of national humiliation. Perhaps the forced scuttling of the fleet at Scarpa Flow in 1919, the refusal of MacDonald's petition to join the League of Nations, or Ireland. There was always Ireland. John Arthur, more clearly in control now, will gaze sadly at his audience. Truly, his eyes say, if only we could only laugh and play like innocent children… If history could go on without us… But there is work to be done…

He speaks more in sorrow than in anger, leaving the abuse and the moronic philosophy to his underlings. When his voice rises, it is imperceptible because it always lies in the wake of the passion of his audience. He seems so calm, in fact, so reluctant, that you find yourself filled with a kind of longing, pleading from your heart for him to take this burden from you, to save you and make you whole. You are urging him on.

Exactly what was said on that night matters anyway as little as his recent speeches at the Olympics, or when he bade farewell to Fordingham's gloriously ill-fated Everest Expedition. All I know is that, despite my shock and fear, I was moved in the way that good popular music sometimes moves me. And that, when John Arthur had finished speaking and had stepped down from the bar with that characteristic head-movement of his, the mood inside the Cottage Spring had changed. Instead of wanting to burn down the local Shamrock Club or Synagogue—if there were any left in the East End by then—or literally beat the shit out of some poor sodomite, the men had had their violence exorcised. They were happy to drift into the darkness towards whatever passed for their homes. For many years, I suppose, I have clung to that image of John Arthur as the queller rather than the creator of violence. It's part of what has kept me sane.

I found myself momentarily rooted behind my pillar in this sudden thinning of the crowd. Francis was laughing and at ease beside the bar on which he'd been standing, his hand resting on the shoulder of a plumper, slightly older man who is now our Deputy Prime Minister, George Arkwright, and talking also to his then second-in-command Peter Harrison, who was executed for treason in 1938. He fixed them with that ever-shifting grey gaze of his, and I was surprised, as he stood there, to see just how thin he still was, and to realise how much I still longed to hold him. For some reason, with that extra unnamed sense of being watched that some people have, he suddenly cast his eyes across the fallen tables and chairs in my direction.

There was nothing for me to do. I just stood there beside that pillar with my hands in the pockets of my grubby coat, looking like the aging mess I knew I was. For a fractional moment, without even time enough for the expression to travel down to the mouth of his lovely, ever-animated face, John Arthur's eyes bore the trace of a smile, a shade of what could only be recognition. Then he looked away.

I pass my days in Penrhos Park, floating through sun and history, dizzy with heatstroke and gallons of sweetly-deceptive Kentish wine, circled by the drone of insects, bicycling children, Cumbernald's whirring cine camera, the roaring, lion-hearted sun. We drive out once to take a picnic amid the ruins of Chepstow Castle, and wandering the town's streets in search of some present to give the Cumbernalds in place of the money for my upkeep that they keep insisting on refusing, it's a surprise to see the people going about clothed here. But they're really not wearing very much after this long summer. Skirts are getting shorter. Slips are showing. The men are redly bare-chested and intriguingly tattooed like Indian braves. The young children look happiest of all as they scatter past the many bookshops, smeared with chocolate, gleefully naked.

Each night, I read Enid Blyton to Christine and Barbara as they thrash about in their hot beds. We pretend we're The Famous Five, and argue about who wants to be George and Tim the dog and where the secret passage might be. On Sunday morning, everyone goes down to the on-site church, which turns out to be the lovingly-restored remnant of a now-vanished village with tubby pillars, crusaders in the crypt, herringbone

Norman arches and a deliciously obscene Grinning Jenny amid the gargoyles. Voices and the odours of damp stone and lilies fill the air as the people come casually, the women without hats, the men in shorts, and giggling children scamper along the aisles. The woman I saw on the beach by the lake is still breastfeeding her baby. It's all so timeless, so cherishably ordinary.

I'm counting the few days of my stay here like a child at Christmas, wishing them longer, wishing away all that must come after. On the last evening, after the bats had replaced the swallows in the deep air and we'd drunk more than ever of the cloudy wine, Eric Cumbernald tries to prod me into saying more about my relationship with John Arthur. Eileen watches on, picking at the ball of her foot. Conscious that I'm getting a chance to earn my keep, I do my best to re-embroider the story that I must have told him before into something believable and attractive. The school. The pit wheels. The quiet lad at the back of the class with his arm raised… For once, I find the tale oddly moving. I wish it were true. Then, perhaps, everything else would be different.

"Why do you think he's chosen now, Geoffrey," Cumbernald wonders, "to see you again?"

"It's his fiftieth birthday," I say. In reality—if there was such a reality—Francis Eveleigh would only be forty six. And his birthday was on the 8th of September, not conveniently on Trafalgar Day. I can remember buying him an embarrassingly over-generous pen and pencil set when he was 19. "Fifty's about the age when people start to look back at their life. It's probably the same even for him…"

Cumbernald nods. Eileen scratches her calf. The trees rustle. I knew John Arthur, and they seem a little bit in awe of me.

"But it's not as if…"

I pause, wondering. For the life of me, I can't understand why Francis has chosen this particular day when so much else—fireworks displays, street parties, hilltop bonfires and marches up the Mall—will be going on. One of his famous impromptu visits, a gentle knock on the door of my college rooms, would have been so much more in keeping with the myth of John Arthur.

"It's not as if I'll be seeing him for long…"

I'm there on the itinerary his senior civil servants have sent me amid a list of fifteen other names. *Six o-clock, the Gardens, 10 Downing Street, PM meets and greets…* Minor dignitaries, unsung party workers. Despite everything else, despite what I'm planning to do, I can't pretend that it didn't hurt to be lumped in with all those nobodies.

"Well…" Cumbernald lights a cigarette, then offers one to Eileen and me with the little coals already glowing. In the thickening darkness, we look like three animated glow worms. "All of us will be with you, Brook. That moment when you and John Arthur shake hands…"

Eggs and Bacon, Eggs and Bacon…

Back from Penrhos Park, to Oxford. This time, both Christine and Barbara manage to be copiously sick in the back of the Daimler. Soggy-sleeved, not far off vomiting myself, I leave the Cumbernalds outside the college arch as they mop up their car and their children.

The days flash by. Golden Week nears. The stones and the fields glow with anticipation. The use of garden hosepipes is banned as rivers and reservoirs sink to levels that, as with floods, storms and snowfalls here in Britain, always seem to be the worst since records began. The fountains are turned off in Trafalgar Square, and the British papers froth and lather about all this ghastly sun, this dreadful good weather. At Oxford, the freshers start to gather. They are pale-faced, blinking with shirt-tails out and their collars itchy from name-tags that mothers and aunts have sewn for them. Hard to believe that in a year or two's time these same people will be eating breakfast at George's Cafe in lipstick-smeared evening clothes, were I to live to see them.

The older University hands, us fellows and dons, doctors and vicars, MAs in abstruse subjects, best-selling authors, sexual molesters, busybodies, surreptitious alcoholics, honourary secretaries, athletes and aesthetes, caw and flap at each other from our roosts in our black gowns. The sun still blazes. The dry trees hold resolutely to their leaves. The punts still move and slow, move and slow beneath Magdalene Bridge before getting stuck in the brown mud and dead reeds of the Cherwell's thinning current.

A message comes through the Varsity post from Bracken. His handwriting is appalling, but it's something about us both tying up science

and history before he leaves. His mad idea that you can research something so well that no one else will ever look at it quite appeals to me. After all, that's exactly what J. D. Beazley did for Greek vases when he wasn't buggering A. E. Houseman. I also receive a J. Arthur Dixon postcard of York Minster from his sister Ursula, although the Censor's approval stamp half-obscures the tiny writing.

I resume my occasional traipses to the Radcliffe. New X-rays reveal that the vast cancerous network that runs through my body, whilst not actually shrinking, has stopped growing. It's still there, still almost certainly lethal. But, to all intents and purposes, the thing's biding its time. Waiting, just as I am, whilst the days slip by into the maw of history.

"Couldn't help noticing, sir," Christlow says, preparatory to spitting on his cloth and wiping the small mirror above my bookshelves one morning, "that you've had an Invitation." He actually says, *Han Hinvitation* on the traditional working class assumption that anything posh has an extra *h* in it.

"That's right." I turn from the A-Z Map of Central London I've been studying and glance through the doorway at the lock on my suitcase. My calendar reads Monday September 30th. Which leaves just twenty-four days. "I suppose you noticed the letters up there."

"It was in the college magazine," he corrects me, in case I should get the idea that he pokes around in my belongings. "Our President's Michaelmas letter. Doctor Cumbernald says, quite rightly, that we'll all be very proud of you on that day, sir. And he adds how much he treasures your close friendship with his family."

"That's nice to hear."

"Matter of fact," Christlow continues, still rubbing the glass as if trying to erase his reflection. "I'll be off down in London myself for the period of the celebrations. In my own minor small capacity. So we may bump into each other…"

"I'll certainly keep an eye out," I say. But London's a big place.

"Convenient, really, that you won't be needing me anyway when I'm not here. Although cover's all sorted out with Wisbeach."

"Of course."

He finally puts down his rag. We find ourselves gazing at each other. I'd never realised before how much Christlow looks like Mussolini: Modernism was probably always his destiny. He clears his throat. He's

probably about to ask me why I'm always hanging around now when he's cleaning my rooms.

"Sad," he says, "wasn't it? I mean that fellow from that new science college. I always like to think we have so much going for ourselves here in this life. So it's a double shame if you get my meaning."

"What fellow?"

"The one that shot himself. I'm sorry sir. You mayn't have heard. But it was in yesterday's *Evening News*, and I'm sure I brought you up your usual copy…"

13

"WALTER NEVER CLEARED THINGS out," Ursula Bracken says as we crouch on the rag rug in the parlour and sort through Walter's old books and magazines and telephone directories, all of which simply need to be thrown away. "The shed's done of course. Some men from the War Office came yesterday in a big van. They seemed surprised at how much there was in there. But you know what they're like up in London. They probably thought the work he was doing was theoretical…"

"Did they find his papers?"

"I really don't know. I don't think they knew themselves. They just took everything. I suppose…" She turns away from the dust to sneeze. "After what's happened, they'll dismiss whatever he's done as some mad obsession, although you and I both know that Walter wasn't like that. Did you see what happened to that big Oxford Dictionary, by the way? He always put it…"

Ursula reaches past me to get to another tea chest, then leans back on the floor, covers her face and gives a long gasping sob.

Ursula hasn't told me exactly what happened, and the local newspapers have been coy enough about it, too. But it's common knowledge—another of those Oxford stories that, unless you're actually involved in them, always seem too weirdly dreadful to be true. Did you hear about the chap who was working on some project to design a better bullet? Tied himself up at the place where he used to aim at pig carcasses and rigged his own firing squad. His sister was the one who eventually found him in the long shed where he did his work. Quite, quite, barking of course. It's said that, from the look of him, you'd never have guessed…

"I wish I'd come over more," I say to her—my ritual acknowledgement of guilt. "I truly liked him. But I've been unwell myself. Obsessed with my own… Ideas. I know that's no good reason."

"Honestly, that doesn't matter." Ursula pulls her handkerchief from the dust-greyed sleeve of her cardigan, wipes her nose, then sneezes again. "It's really…"

“And this business about having to go to Australia. I know that that was bothering him.”

“It wasn’t,” she says in a voice that allows no argument. “What was bothering Walter was *Walter.* Australia would have been good for him if he’d wanted it to be. No, what Walter did was…”

“Unpredictable?”

“Inevitable.” She wrinkles her nose. “I can see that now. I can’t blame anyone.” Meaning herself. Meaning me. “Some things are inevitable, you know. Night follows day, doesn’t it? You get the programmes you’re expecting on the telly unless there’s been a delay at Lords. Walter was wrong, you see. Some things really are inevitable. Perhaps this was just his way of proving it to himself…”

She stands up then, her knees cracking. She goes to the window, narrow shoulders hunched up nearly to her ears as she looks out.

“He never got over the death of our father. Daddy brought us up really. Our mother died when she had me, so he had to do the job of both. Daddy was a good man. He began to suffer from premature dementia soon after Walter went up to Warwick. Died of it when he was only fifty five, although by the end I found myself wishing it had happened sooner…” Faintly, I can hear lads yelling to each other as they play football out on the green. The thump of boot against leather always sounds violent to me. I can’t help thinking of someone’s head. “…Of course, it was me who had to look after him. Walter just stopped coming home when Daddy ceased to recognise him. But it’s not *just* what you see, is it? If something happens, it happens anyway. It’s there, you can’t help it. It affects you whether you want it to or not.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realise how hard it must have been…”

“When we were young, Walter used to say how he’d like to build this big machine when he grew up and put every single fact about the universe into it. He remembered Mummy, you see. He said that if he had this machine he’d always know what was going to happen next. Sounds stupid, I know. He told me later that it wouldn’t work. I suppose he wanted control.”

“We can’t control our lives, though, can we?”

“No.” She looks hard at me. “We just have to live through what we are, don’t we, Brook? And history…”

The titles on the next box Ursula and I'll have to go through are things like THE ALGEBRAIC EIGENVALUE PROBLEM. THE PROPERTIES AND APPLICATIONS OF DIFFERENTIABILITY. Funny, how we struggle to make sense out of something as brutal as an act of fatality on your own body. In a way, though, Bracken's got his wish. He found out how to destroy the Humane Bullet. It's tainted research. No one will touch it now.

"I'll be leaving soon anyway," Ursula says, turning back from the window. She grabs an old seed catalogue that lies by the fire and flips through its pages, staring down through it. "Oxford's never meant anything to me. Do you know how many people turned up to the bypass protest committee meeting last night? Just one. And the college wants this cottage back. Once they've demolished that bloody shed…"

"Where are you going?"

"America," she says, and sniffs, giving a long involuntary shiver. "I want to get out whilst I still can. I have a cousin in Philadelphia, and there's a friend who's looking to start afresh in Montana where there's nothing but open sky and you can ride for days and the hills are so big they follow you in the distance. This tiny country's rotten…"

I bid my final farewell to Ursula Bracken at Oxford Station just two weeks later. As I'd expected, the funeral was a sparse affair, and the case for the inquest was open and shut. No one else is here to see her off.

She shows me the travel authorisations she's obtained as we stand waiting on the platform for the slightly delayed Liverpool train, and I dutifully admire them. It's become a British habit. People have started to collect and swap the older ones—there's even a society for it. Ursula's are temporary, and she's only permitted to take enough money to the States for a two month holiday. If she doesn't come back then, whatever else she owns or has in her bank account will be frozen. Eventually after publication of the appropriate notices in the London Gazette, all her assets will be repossessed by the Government.

"Is there anything I can do?" I ask vaguely.

She shakes her head. "I think they probably know, don't you? People like me are scuttling off the ship like rats. I'm not brainy like Walter. I haven't got any qualifications. They probably think good riddance." She smiles. The Tannoy chimes the names of Midlands towns. "Immigration

into the United States isn't easy, either. For all I know, they may send me back."

"I'm sure they'll be happy to have you."

"Ha—all hundred million of them! Anyway, I've brought everything I can. You needn't worry about me, Geoffrey. I can look after myself."

"I can't think of anyone who'd do it better."

Embarrassed by all this silly intimacy, we shift our gaze and look around at the heaped mailsacks, and at the other people who are waiting. A boy is being comforted by his mother beside of one of those useless vending machines you always get at stations. Now *there's* something even John Arthur hasn't managed to put right.

I glance back at Ursula at the same moment that she looks at me. Part of me wishes the train would hurry up now and put an end to this unnaturally protracted process. The other wants to tell her about Francis, about John Arthur. About everything.

"Before he died," she says before I can begin, "Walter mentioned to me that you were seriously ill."

"Yes…"

"I'm sorry." She reaches out and squeezes my claw-like hand with her own. Which is young, alive. "I hope things get better."

I nod, suddenly near to tears. At that moment, saving us both, the sound of the arriving train breaks along the platform. A soldier and his girlfriend kiss extravagantly. A lady in a salad bowl hat asks us if this really *is* the train to Liverpool.

I help Ursula off the platform with the lighter of her two suitcases, sliding it along the corridor until she finds a compartment. We touch hands, and then I step back onto the platform.

The stationmaster's whistle blows. The train hoots back excitedly. Ursula leans out as the carriage begins to slide beneath the platform bridges. *Ham and eggs, ham and eggs.* We gaze at each other, unsmiling now, separated by steam and distance.

I turn away when the train has gone from sight. It's still early. The news hoardings on the Botley Road bookstall promise a special Trafalgar Celebration pull-out in today's *Mirror,* but they've already been beaten to this by Monday's *Cross* and Tuesday's *Express.*

It’s called the Trafalgar Celebration, despite the fact it’ll be going on for days and the Battle of Trafalgar happened exactly 135 years ago—not a particularly significant anniversary. It’s as if all the other festivals and celebrations that have taken place in Greater Britain still haven’t satisfied our hunger. The Olympics, after all, were international, try as we might to make them British. Even the huge Exhibition of 1938 was about the Empire, and in *Glasgow* of all places. No, what Britain craves is something inward-looking, a festival where we don’t have to put up with the rest of the world, even if the rest of the world would come if it were invited.

It is, at the end of the day, purely a celebration of the fiftieth birthday of John Arthur. The *Mirror*, though, is as coy about this as every other newspaper. It’s as if, as long we keep our voices down, the man himself won’t see it coming. He’s busy, after all. He’d never want a fuss made. He’ll wake up on the day (very early, as is his habit) from his plain bed in his plain bedroom of his famously small self-contained flat on the third floor at 10 Downing Street. He’ll stretch and turn on the light. Just this once, he’ll find the whole nation has got up before him. We’ll be grinning in party hats. Bearing jellies, egg sandwiches, little sausages speared with sticks…

My hands shake as I hold the newspaper. All of the pains that the long summer almost burned away seem to be coming back again. By now, everything has a sense of inevitability. Walter Bracken—*poor* Walter, as I stupidly thought of him without even realising—has seen to that. I owe it to him, and to Ursula. I owe it to my acquaintance. I even owe it to Francis, although I can’t quite explain why. There’s no turning back.

Gripping the polished handle of my walking stick, I cross the road, clumsily avoiding a bus. The air has a cooler feel to it this morning. There’s still even a hint, where the longest shadows fall, of dew on the pavements. The limes are dripping. Sycamore seeds are spinning. The swallows will soon be gone. The soft autumn sun bathes the towers and rooftops and domes with golden light. As I pause to look back after crossing the canal, a dark figure scuttles from sight behind a steeply-loaded coal wagon. This time, I fancy that I glimpse his face: but it’s only Christlow. And the all bells of Oxford ringing, filling my head, my eyes, my heart. History beckons.

My moment has come.

PART TWO

14

THE NARRATOR IN WILLIAM Morris's *News From Nowhere* awakes in London to find that summer has at last arrived. The air smells sweeter as he wanders the streets, half in a daze. The Thames runs cleaner, and the buildings along its banks have been transformed into glorious works of art. The people wear bright costumes, and smile at each other as they go about their everyday tasks. There is no poverty. Everywhere, there are pretty houses set amid fields: the rigid barrier between town and country has dissolved. Children camp in the Kensington Woods. The Houses of Parliament have been turned into a vegetable market.

A full century and a half before Morris predicted, as I gaze down from an airship droning high above the stately parks and teeming streets and the sun-flecked river, his dream of Nowhere has come true. Even the old landmarks look remade in this vision of London. Truly, I think as I sip my chattering glass of iced gin, this city has never looked lovelier. The Adelphi Theatre. Cleopatra's Needle. The sightseeing boats that thread their wakes across the Thames. The trams like insects as they move over Blackfriars with their shining beetle backs, their raised antenna…

The aspidistra beside me nods in agreement and we tilt back over London towards the westering sun, but the other passengers aboard *The Queen of Air and Darkness* are subdued as the gondola sways. Most are sitting as far away as possible from the airship's windows. The beautiful second wife of a Modernist Zulu chief is covering her eyes, and the Chief Executive of Northumberland County Council is the colour of Christine and Barbara Cumbernald on the drive back from Penrhos Park. The Rolls Royce engines change tone as we tilt on some stray zephyr over Vauxhall. The wires tense and sing. For the Director of the Tate Gallery, as she moans and buries her face into a sick bag, it is already too late.

The engines rise to a piercing roar as the *Queen* sinks down through the skies and across the flashing lakes and lidos of Hyde Park, and pram-pushing mothers shade their eyes to look up. Eventually, after much tilting and squealing of airbags, the airship is safely moored to a huge gantry, and we are escorted along a wobbling tunnel to the lift that bears us to the

ground. There, a bus sponsored by Cozy Stoves and Oxo awaits to take us along Park Lane, Resolution Hill and the Mall. This autumn day still feels balmily warm, trapped with city heat as I climb, my limbs easy from the gin and the tablets, to the bus's open top.

We are slowed by the traffic of trams, taxis, Bristols, Ladybirds. The London pavements, too, bustle with businessmen, sightseers, shoppers. The air smells of diesel, cigarettes, frying onions. The lenses of a Pathé News camera follow us from the corner of Oxford Street and Portland Place. It would be rude not to smile and wave. Who knows, a darker thought nudges me, this image of the killer's face may be the one that makes it into history. From further down the bus, I can hear Father Phelan effing and blinding. A comic-turn Irish priest of the kind you get in Ealing B-film comedies—the only kind of Irishman, in fact, that you're likely to see on mainland Britain—Father Phelan supposedly coached John Arthur in boxing after the War, although that's the one thing he won't talk about. Our bus turns into the wide new architecture of Charing Cross Road. Then Trafalgar Square. A pigeon on each shoulder, Nelson stands huffily on his pedestal. Vast, sheer, the Victory Spire at the end of Park Lane looks like some Jules Verne rocket, or a new secret weapon. Compared with all of this, and even cleaned of all the grime and bird mess, the great government offices along Whitehall are solid and sombre. Their Victorian arches seem to frown; reluctant participants in this Summer Isles dream. Yet they, too, radiate power. From beneath them, it is said, tunnels, offices and air raid shelters fan out across this whole city.

To our right lies Downing Street. Even as we watch, the gates slide open on electric hinges. Out rolls a black Rover 3 Litre with Austin police patrol cars ahead and behind. There are no bells, no flashing lights. As the cars turn up Whitehall—perhaps towards New Buckingham Palace—I glimpse John Arthur's face, absorbed in thought as he stares from the Rover's plain unsmoked glass. My heart freezes. For a moment, even Father Phelan is dumbstruck.

Our bus crosses the new Waterloo Bridge. Ahead on the South Bank, easily dwarfing the old County Hall where John Arthur made his first lunge at power, lies the National Theatre, the Empire Exhibition Centre, our own New Dorchester Hotel. Wrought shamelessly of glass, steel girders, concrete, these buildings are massive, slope-shouldered, aspirational. After

years of semi-classical drifting, Greater British architecture has found its true voice. There are hints of Venetian Palaces, pagan ruins—something Mayan, even; the sea-dipped relics of a lost civilisation. But above all, the buildings on the south bank of the Thames look like nothing more than a brace of art nouveau wardrobes.

The buses pull in at the New Dorchester's entrance through the dust of the work on the new Underground. A loud-hailer calls out incoherent instructions as we minor dignitaries mill about on the marble paving. Slowly, muttering in several languages, we shuffle through the revolving doors. Hugh Reeve-Ellis, the Under Secretary who's in charge of us here, maintains his usual weary air. Once one of his underlings has retrieved my forgotten walking stick from the bus, he lays a moth-like hand on my shoulder and steers me across the New Dorchester's vast main atrium where fountains burble, Elgar's *Chanson De Nuit plays* from hidden loudspeakers and high, high above, beyond the recessed galleries, bare-breasted caryatids raise their arms to support the arches of the glass-domed roof like the colliding prows of a dozen ships.

"Two days before the big day now, Brook. About time we had that little chat…"

I nod without enthusiasm, although I know Reeve-Ellis is making a point of talking privately with all the Trafalgar Celebration guests he's responsible for. He leads me past the hotel souvenir shop. There, beside a door marked NO ADMITTANCE, a plump Police constable T3308 lounges on a chair, his holstered pistol hanging between his legs like a cock. I've yet to fathom what dictates whether a particular job should be done by the Metropolitan Police, the regular army or the KSG. He stands up as we approach.

"Good day for the weather sir?"

"Well… You know…" Reeve-Ellis mutters dismissively as the door closes solidly behind us. My skin prickles, but along each side of the corridor beyond lie rooms from which typewriters crackle, phones ring, filing cabinets drawers boom open and shut; it's the very picture of bureaucratic ordinariness. People rush up to Reeve-Ellis. He snaps at them. They rush away again. There's an air of controlled crisis.

"So this is where everything gets done?"

“I wish it was…” Reeve-Ellis shows me into a temporary office and shuts the door. “’Fraid everything’s a mess here,” he says as he removes his jacket and shrugs on a baggy grey cardigan. “Been meaning to ask, by the way. You don’t remember Pim Wargrove?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Before your time at the Varsity, I suppose…” His little moustache bristles. He attempts a smile.

I know already that Reeve-Ellis is a Balliol man, 1909 intake, that he went straight into Whitehall, and was working in Cabinet Office when Lloyd George resigned. So he’s seen it all, has Reeve-Ellis, has toiled under every shade of administration. A generalist through and through, he takes Modernism in his stride. He’s near the end of his career now, seconded for the term of the Trafalgar Celebrations from his usual job supervising prison budgets at the Home Office. You get the impression he wishes he wasn’t.

“So. Everything just the way you expected it to be?”

“I had no idea what to expect.”

“Good. Good.” He studies me. Pale and brittle, he’s much easier to imagine dead than Cumbernald—in fact, he seems half-way there already. “So I suppose Monday evening’s the big event for you…”

“I’ve been meaning to ask. Exactly how—”

“—You’ll be up in the VIP seats for the afternoon parade up the Mall. Have to miss the end of *that*, though, I’m afraid, if we’re going to get you across to Downing Street in time.” He smiles. “Don’t look so worried. The streets will be cleared.”

“So there’ll be—what?—about twenty or so people in the gardens at Number Ten. And I suppose some… Staff?”

“That’s about right. It’s an informal occasion.”

“Is there anything I need to bring?”

“Just yourself will do.”

We drift into silence for a moment. A phone bings.

“What if it rains?”

“We’re a lucky country, Brook. It won’t rain—and there are contingency plans, anyway, if it does. Not many of us get the chance to meet the PM. Least of all to be able to call him an old friend. He’s very keen, so I’m told by the people who actually know about these things. Of course, I’m just the conduit…”

He smiles again.

“And I can assure you that when the PM’s keen for something to happen, it happens. As I say, keep a space in your diary for six o-clock, Monday. Everything has been arranged. Don’t worry about protocol or what suit to wear—JA’s the least bothered person about that kind of thing you could possibly imagine.”

“I do have a new suit, actually,” I say. “It was delivered to me this morning from Hawkes on Saville Row.”

I’m in my usual old slacks and tweeds at the moment, so Reeve-Ellis can’t help but look a little relieved. Hand-tailored, crisp and smelling of starch and cool unadulterated newness, the thing cost me a fortune, and feels quite different to any clothing I’ve ever worn. Just as I requested, the jacket has been tailored with an especially strong and deep inner left-side pocket. The cut is so good you’d never know it was there.

In my room, I disentangle my feet from my shoes and gobble my tablets. A fresh *Evening Standard* lies on the marble table. FRANCE AND BRITAIN CLASH OVER EGYPT. You can feel the news hotting up as autumn slowly cools, although this is probably just another Embassy bombing. The French have their own right wing ultra-nationalist government now that Blum’s been succeeded by De Gaulle, although it seems a poor shadow of our own Modernism.

I flop down on the huge oval bed and gaze up at the nymphs and seashells on the ceiling. My throat aches. My heart hammers. Beyond that, everything is eerily silent. Just the buzz of the air-conditioning, the maritime bustle of the evening river softened to a whisper by the thick double glazing of my balcony doors.

Lying here, I can summon anything I want just by pressing the lines of brass buttons above the mahogany headboard. I can call Room Service. I can make the lights brighten. There are bakelite angels, deep fur rugs, soft leather chairs, a shrine-like corner which houses a huge television set, and an ornate stained-glass frieze depicting Saint George Resting In A Forest set into the far wall.

I press a button marked MUSIC. An orchestra swells. The one beside it is CURTAINS, and causes red velvet to whisper across my balcony windows. I lie there as the music flows, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Then, sitting up, crossing my room, I slide back the shining teak doors that hide my suitcase and few clothes.

There was an awkward moment on my arrival when the porter virtually insisted on unpacking for me. Still, I managed to dissuade him; I was probably helped by the look of this old suitcase. It needs straps now just to keep it together. Moving as much by touch as sight in this gloom, I lift it out from the wardrobe, open the lid and slide my hand into the bottom's flabby lining, feeling for the gnarled stock of the pistol.

I sit down on the bed with it gripped in my hands, conscious of the weight of the metal, the pull of history, gravity, fate. Then—now seems as good a time as any—I begin to load it from a crumpled and faintly lavender-smelling handkerchief with my five remaining bullets. I tested the others from close range against a dead stump late one evening in Readon Woods when the very stars seemed to shrink back and the trees in the clearing rustled in surprise at each loud sound. Now, each bullet makes a tiny but purposeful click as I slide it home. The pistol still smells faintly of oil and of Walter's Bracken's shed. Is *this* what death smells like? Is death so clean? I spin the cylinder, ease back the hammer, then lock it home.

Later, unable to rest, I put on my coat, take the lift and head out into the sprawling London night. The traffic roars by as I cross Westminster Bridge and pass the old Houses of Parliament; floodlit, not even the vegetable market that Morris envisaged, but a lesser stopover on London's ever-expanding tourist circuit, they look no more real now than the reflection that slides and breaks in the Thames. The strung lights along the Embankment twinkle as I stride at my best walking stick-assisted pace. People are *running*, amazingly enough, dressed up like athletes in shorts and vests, and there are accordionists and street vendors, floating restaurants, arm in arm lovers, wandering tourists. I, as ever, turn along darker ways. Beside Blackfriars, the arches remain litter-strewn, sootily furred, and ghosts of old newspapers rise on the air as a train clanks overhead, drawing up scents of decay. A footstep scuffs amid the unlit backs of buildings. A shadow retreats. But I'm safe here in this new country that I find myself in. There are no tramps and perverts left to bother me.

I visit a bar along Fleet Street, which has a blurry and expectant air as it waits for the weary journalists to arrive once their papers have been put to

bed. Drinking several pints of Fuller's expensive and overrated ale, I try to summon the energy for the long walk back to the New Dorchester, or at least to find the nearest Underground or taxi rank. Back in central London after an age, I can't help feeling a twinge of my old erotic longing. It was always at its strongest in me at the times like this when sex was only a chance, an unfathomed possibility. It was really more about simply being here; about being a stranger. The line of a knuckle; the curve of a jaw; a dark hint of eyelash; grey eyes; a glimpsed line of belly hair. I could love people more easily if they came broken up into smaller packages.

The door bursts open. Loud and beery from the all places they've already visited, a group of lads rush in from the night. I study their close-cropped necks and the workings of their shoulders as they crowd close to the bar. Linking arms, they begin a jokey chorus of *Happy Birthday To You*, and I find that something in my head is singing also, grinding and buzzing in my ears like some huge engine in the way that the world sometimes does if I've had either too many or too few tablets.

Suddenly, it comes back to me. I'm standing in another London pub, depressed and sore after having staggered through the nettles of a patch of wasteground from my assailant-lover. I can't get a drink, and there's something odd about the atmosphere. Violent, even. Then there's a stir in a corner. A few voices are raised jokingly in song—*Happy Birthday To You*—before a man breaks from them. He's good-looking and still seems youthful, although he's starting to grey and there are lines around his eyes. He climbs up onto the bar—jumps, really. He smiles, raises his hands…

Yes, now I remember. Now, I understand why he's invited me. That night at the Cottage Spring when I first saw John Arthur will, I realise, lie exactly 15 years into history in two days' time.

I thought I'd already been through all the possible stages of grieving for my Francis by then. I'd been angry. Almost suicidally miserable. I'd been frantically busy—and near-comatose with self-pity. Eventually, just as one grows weary even of weariness on the longest of journeys, I'd come to imagine that my life was no longer under his shadow.

But just knowing how I looked to him as I stood in that pub—the way he almost smiled and turned away—made me realise that everything about

me was still Francis, Francis, Francis. What, otherwise, was I doing in London in the first place, if not trying to wipe out my love for him?

The first ripples of knowing that Francis was still alive brought a fierce self-questioning. Alone, unloved, I saw my life for the shambles it was. After that, I became desperately angry. Angry with *him*—this John Arthur who stood up in the Cottage Spring—for living. Angry with Francis for choosing to die. For the first time in my life, I was even angry with history itself.

After that, I came to doubt my own sanity. *Had* I really seen Francis? *Had* he ever died? Had I ever really been in love with him? And one man can easily look very much like another—especially after so many years.

Predictably for me, it all soon became a matter of research. Hence a burrowing in the Lichfield City Council records. Hence a sudden interest in London East End politics. But, even in 1925, John Arthur was no longer a totally obscure figure, and I was soon saved the trouble of having to delve through my specially-ordered copies of *National Rights!* and *The Spitalfields Chronicle* to follow his activities. As if my finding him conferred some form of blessing, John Arthur started getting mentions in the national press.

Politics was still an alien sport to me. At that time, apart from the chance it gave me to study John Arthur's face in the newspapers and follow the greying of his hair, Churchill's use of right wing groups such as Saint George's Men to help break the long succession of strikes didn't seem especially significant. On the back of this, though, John Arthur's was one of several names to emerge into the wider acres of political debate. Many of the others are now also major figures, or have died in mysterious or shameful circumstances. But John Arthur was always ahead of the rest. His gaze was straight. His voice came across clearly, honestly. The press and the radio and the cinema adored him for his young face, the grey hair, those penetrating blue eyes, the mixture of youth and maturity that he presented. With his accent, his manners, he seemed both educated and working class: no wonder I'd loved him. In an age of lost certainties, he made good copy. And he had a knack of simply stating the obvious—that Britain was poor, that we were shamed by the loss of Ireland and Empire—that most politicians seem to lack. After the next year or so, when Churchill had succeeded in curbing the powers of the unions and stabilising the economy,

he no longer needed the likes of John Arthur's shabby troops, and stated so publicly. No doubt he thought they would sink back into the mire from which he had raised them.

I didn't believe John Arthur would survive this wilderness period, either. He'd been a talking point of sorts, but few people had taken very much notice of what he actually said, and even fewer embraced it. When he led the remnants of his renamed Empire Alliance on a march to take County Hall in the spring of 1927, it seemed as if this one rash act had finally burst what little remained of Britain's Fascist bubble.

The trial for sedition that followed was John Arthur's turning point. He used it as a platform to expose the snobbish barristers, the senile judges, the callow press; all the rottenness at the heart of Britain. Was I urging him on, clapping and cheering like that jury? I suppose I was—the part of me, anyway, that didn't fantasise about a defeated and powerless John Arthur becoming Francis Eveleigh again, returning to Lichfield in anonymity and resuming the life that he and I had lost before it even began. Unlike William Arkwright, Peter Harrison and the soon-to-be rising star of Jim Toller, John Arthur was never openly racist or intolerant. He criticised De Valera's government, but not the Irish. He condemned crime—but then, who didn't? He spoke sadly but hopefully about the problems of those who, for one reason or another, found it impossible to fit into British society. Gypsies. Deviants. Jews. The mentally subnormal. The criminally insane—and homosexuals. The more enlightened hoped that this was merely an acknowledgement of the country's problems. The naive, stupid and violent found justification for all their existing prejudices.

After his triumphant acquittal, John Arthur was fully established as a major public figure. His views were sought on every issue, his speeches were reported verbatim in the press. Many people still found him objectionable—a peddler of poorly-concealed hate and ludicrously simple solutions—but even they were talking about him. His carefully-cultured background, the wanderings, the War record, the boxing, the thuggery and unemployment of the East End, presented, like the rest of the man, so many facets that you could select the one you preferred and cling to it whilst ignoring the rest. And there was always the chance that anyone who spoke too openly against him would find their house burnt down, or fail to notice an oncoming lorry.

In the winter of 1927, John Arthur stood at a by-election in Nottinghamshire as the first-ever Empire Alliance candidate. He won easily against the usual Tory and Labour nobodies. His maiden speech in Parliament was awaited breathlessly, and the large turn-out of communist and socialist demonstrators on the streets of London only added to the sense of occasion. Nowadays, it would be broadcast live on television and radio. As things were then, I only read the full text next morning. I can well remember that moment when I picked up my copies of the *Times, Telegraph, Mirror, Express* and *Sketch* from my doormat and studied the similar headlines, the similar photos of John Arthur, and felt the usual giddy churning in my belly.

Appropriately enough, I think it was the *Sketch* that ran a smaller by-line asking WHO IS GEOFFREY BROOK? I could have posed the same question myself until I read the article, which quoted an aside in John Arthur's speech about how he'd briefly attended school in Burntwood, Lichfield, where he'd been much influenced by a teacher named Geoffrey Brook. After all, I was a distant memory to him; a lonely man on whom he'd taken pity in exchange for a free holiday just before the War. There was no reason why, in generously giving me a raft to cling to in my rapidly-sinking life, he should exactly remember my name. Sometimes even now, when I'm awake in the darkest corners of the night, I'm tormented by the possibility that there is a real Geoffrey Brook still out there waiting to claim my life, and that I am nothing but an impostor.

Over the next few days, when the press somehow discovered my address, I had my own few moments of fame. They called me Geoffrey, and it seemed churlish to correct them when they were so nearly right. Would it have made any difference if I had announced from my doorstep that, whilst I knew little enough about this man who called himself John Arthur, he reminded me markedly of someone else with whom I had once had a homosexual affair? Other than betraying a trust and guaranteeing my death in some freak accident, I doubt it.

The next year, 1928, whilst John Arthur was joined by another 10 EA MPs at the spring General Election, and Churchill continued about the dogged business of keeping himself in power, the editor of the *Daily Sketch* approached me about writing a weekly column, although I always thought of the money and satisfaction that came from being a populariser of history

as a last gift from my Francis. At last, I felt like someone who mattered. My life, much as his own had been, was remade.

Churchill lasted until October 1929 and the Wall Street Crash, when Britain became the world leader in the 1930s Depression. Churchill resigned after all the usual crises and gambled on calling another General Election. This time he didn't get back in. The Empire Alliance returned with 30 MPs, Ramsey MacDonald became Prime Minister of a Government of National Unity whilst Oswald Mosley attempted to reunite Labour before giving up entirely and joining the EA six months later, thus forcing another General Election. John Arthur travelled from constituency to constituency by Vickers aeroplane, and such was the dangerous glamour of the EA by then that even his fat deputy George Arkwright became a vote winner with his trademark Homburg hat, his down-to-earth manner. Uniformed EA members marched in the streets of all the big towns, and noted names as people emerged from polling stations. The EA won seventy seats. Amid an atmosphere of increasing crisis—unemployment, means tests, riots and starvation, open revolt in India, popular support for Unionist terrorist attacks in Ireland—John Arthur refused new Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's offer of a post in his Cabinet.

Chamberlain's get-tough policy in India only served to increase the bloodshed, and the rest of the Empire was also starting to fray. A new Egyptian Government, encouraged by the French, nationalised the Suez Canal. In Britain, a State of Emergency was declared. Welsh and Scottish nationalists began to talk of independence. The country was in a state of collapse.

Chamberlain was probably right in imagining that Britain would be torn apart by another pointless General Election. He was running out of options, but there remained one figure that the great mass public still seemed to believe in. Not really a *politician* at all, it was true, and head of an organisation that had never properly disowned violence. But controllable, surely; a useful figurehead to keep the prols happy and the bully boys at bay whilst the real brains got on with sorting out the mess that the country was in. It was thus without fuss or bloodshed, in a deal in which he seemingly played no part, that John Arthur was finally summoned to Number 10 and offered the only Cabinet post that he had said he would ever consider accepting.

Just after six o-clock on the chilly evening of November 10 1932, John Arthur emerged from that famous black door to the clink of flashbulbs. In those days, traffic was still allowed along Downing Street, and he had to check left and right before he crossed over and raised his arms and smiled slightly as he looked about him like someone who is expecting to awake at any moment from a pleasant but puzzling dream.

He made to open his mouth, then hesitated, waiting for the journalists to quieten, for the expectant silence to grow. He muttered something about wishing he'd combed his hair. There was laughter, again quickly stilled. Then he said that he'd be heading off to Buckingham Palace in a few minutes, where he planned to seek King George's advice about forming Greater Britain's first Modernist Government…

Just by saying this, he'd probably already broken the protocols he'd agreed with Chamberlain. There was no talk of balances and coalitions. No mention of negotiations with other parties. But it didn't matter now. Everything would soon be changed. John Arthur was in power.

15

NEXT MORNING, WEIGHED DOWN with the fatty ballast of a full English breakfast, I wander in the New Dorchester's glowing amber air. Everywhere, people are smiling. The women are in wisps of crepe-de-chine. The girls are dressed up like bridesmaids. The boys come in kilts and bow ties. The men opt for tight double-breasted or looser colonial ice-cream suits.

I trip down carpet waterfalls, drawn by signs that point towards the AIR RAID SHELTER. Down and down, dicing with the newfangled escalators, and still the New Dorchester's smooth luxury doesn't give out. Regrettably, the entrance to the shelter itself is closed. It looks like a cloakroom as I peer through the metal links of the sliding gate.

Further up, although still deep underground, lies the SOLARIUM AND SWIMMING POOL. It's damply warm here, a perpetual tropic midday closer to the earth's core. Beads of sweat pop up on my face as I drop into one of the deckchairs that populate the tiled shore. I watch shamelessly as various bodies dive and slice beneath the rippling mock-cavern roof. I don't know why the smell of these places is always so nostalgic, or why swimming costumes are so much more erotic than the mere nakedness of Penrhos Park…

"Found your way down here, Mr. Brook? Thinking of trying the water?"

Slick and wet, he squats down beside me in just his trunks. I know I should recognise him.

"Tony Anderson. KSG," he says, smiling at my confusion. "I came up to Oxford to deliver the PM's letter. You look better than when I last saw you. After that illness on your holiday in Scotland. I hope you don't mind me saying that, Mr. Brook."

Captain Anderson shakes the droplets from his right hand and offers it to me. His grip is moist, vast. The hairs across his chest have been sculpted into little chevrons.

"You're, ah, working here?"

“You could say that.” He slicks back his hair. “On duty, I suppose you might call it…” He glances around. A young woman, equally sleek, almost equally lovely, climbs out from the pool at the far side and waves. He waves back. “I wish it was always like this…”

“Girlfriend?” I ask.

He shrugs. “A colleague. We, ah—well, you know…” He grins. My heart skips about in my ribcage. “There’s nothing going on there at the moment. To be honest, I wasn’t quite straight with you when I came up to Oxford with that letter.”

“Oh?”

“The fact is, I volunteered. You see, I always enjoyed those articles you wrote for the *Daily Sketch.* Well—*enjoyed* isn’t quite the right word. They meant a lot to me. And you must have led a fascinating life. Being at Oxford. Having met John Arthur.”

“It’s had its moments. And I’m pleased you remember the articles…”

“So I was wondering if I could perhaps take you out for a meal this evening? I really would welcome the opportunity to have a proper talk with you.”

“I’m not sure I’ll have the energy. I’m supposed to be going to New Buckingham Palace this afternoon. It’s nice of you to ask but—”

“—Of course. I understand.” Captain Anderson stands up and the water pats down from him, splashing on the tiles. The blue air shimmers. My thoughts are doing leapfrogs. You never know with these people, not even when they’re in wet swimming trunks and you can see the bulge of their cock. But what would be more suspicious: to accept a seemingly genuine offer, or turn it down for no proper reason?

The flags and the bunting are going up as I’m chauffeur-driven across London towards New Buckingham Palace. Tomorrow is the eve of Trafalgar Day, although my itinerary is blessedly blank apart from the evening Thanksgiving Service at Westminster Abbey. Already cheery messages to our Leader have replaced the advertisements on the sides of buses for Idris Table Waters, Venos’s Cough Cure and Dr J. Collis Browns’s Chlorodyne. GREATER BRITAIN THANKS YOU. HERE’S TO THE FUTURE. Madame Tussauds, with its fine displays of British celebrities and grisly French and Irish atrocities, is granting free admission. All pretence of

normality has been forgotten—as has the fiction that we can keep all of this secret from John Arthur. He *must* know by now.

My long black Daimler sweeps with a stream of others around Hyde Park Corner and through the towering gates to pull up beside the steel flagpoles in front of New Buckingham Place. I wade through a dizzy sense of unreality past the guardsmen in their busbies and up the vast carpet-tongued marble steps into the jaws of the glittering doorway. I queue to be greeted in the crystal fairyland of the Great Hall amid white-plumed colonial hats and Technicolour saris. I'm giving Monday's suit a trial-airing, and have even placed *News From Nowhere* in the inner pocket to give a similar weight and feel to the pistol. Nobody stops me. Nobody searches me. Once I've handed in my invitation card and have had a name tag attached to my lapel, no one even asks me who I am. There are one or two square-looking men who don't seem to be guests lingering at watery intersections of tile and glass, but they keep well out of the way.

Dresses rustle as the queue shuffles forward to meet the Royal Family. I breathe the jangling air that is mingled with the scents of floor polish, lilies, mothballs, new leather, face powder, eu de cologne. My palms start to sweat. This really is starting to feel like a dry run for the day after tomorrow. There's the barbed sense of ordinariness, fear and monumentality that must claw at the mind of every assassin as they wait for their moment to come.

My turn arrives to meet the Royal Family. His Highness the Duke of York stammers slightly as he greets me. I bow. Then his wife the Duchess, their two plain daughters. A moment later I'm standing before King Edward and Queen Wallis. Me! Whoever I am. I glance discreetly to both sides as I bow whilst, frail as dry leaves, their gloved fingers brush against mine. It would be easy for me to reach inside my jacket at this point. The gesture would seem innocent—part of the overall motion of bowing. Click back the hammer as I pull the pistol out. *Blam.* Then *blam* again. Two shots, minimum. Walter's Humane Bullets thudding into the chest at close range, exploding through the basic organs, shredding blood vessels, bone, gristle. Within moments, this whole place would implode in shatters of glass and steel, it and Greater Britain would be drawn up through the skies in a hissing gale, back towards fairyland where they belong. The King clears his

throat. A liveried butler touches my shoulder. The queue shuffles forward again. I float away.

The guests wander out through pillared archways into the afternoon's gracious warmth. There's a stir when the silver trays of sweet Merrydown Wine emerge for the royal toast—it's better than the stuff I tasted on Midsummer Night, but still not a patch on my college's champagne—another when the shadow of *The Queen Of Air and Darkness* drifts over our heads; hired today by the BBC as a part of their live outside broadcast. The gardens as I explore them still feel a little like Green Park of old. The stepped orchards and monumental statues don't quite fit. The roses that amazingly still bud and flower on the trellises in this bright October sunlight look too red, too raw. You can almost smell the paint, and hear the bellowing voice of the Queen of Hearts. *No! No! Sentence first—verdict afterwards.*

Much of what happened after John Arthur became Prime Minister seemed so *traditional* that at first even the skeptics were reassured: the marches, the brass bands, the jamborees, the re-planting of public parks, the resumption of longer pub opening hours, the improvement of the roads and the railways. Economic prosperity, although it didn't arrive immediately, already seemed to be on its way.

The arrests certainly came. The few remaining communist and socialist MPs were immediately deprived of their seats—after the years of riots, strikes and disturbances, that only seemed like a sensible precaution. Left wing newspapers like the *Manchester Guardian* were the subject of firebomb attacks, and bookshops and news vendors soon took the hint that it was better not to stock them. The Jews and the Irish were the subject of intimidation. Homosexuals were still routinely beaten up. In fact, in many ways, little had changed. At this early stage in the dream of Greater Britain, it was often the groups John Arthur was soon to eradicate who pleaded loudest for his protection.

At this time, Britain was still supposedly a democracy. There were debates in Parliament, and for a while even a Cabinet of sorts. But John Arthur plainly had little time for the fripperies of a discredited political system. He was too busy actually governing the country. In his first weeks in power, he passed by acclamation—the few more bothersome MPs who

might have voted according to their conscience being conveniently ill or missing—a short Enabling Bill that built upon the foundation of Chamberlain's Emergency Powers Act to the extent that he could rule by decree. Legally, nothing had changed; the courts still continued to translate the law. In a country without any written constitution, John Arthur took a cautious and legalistic route towards dictatorship.

For a while, people still talked about a time when they might choose not to vote for John Arthur and give the Tories or even Labour another bash. But a series of convenient events arose to secure Modernist power more deeply. In India, a scandal-embroiled Gandhi was arrested and soon after supposedly committed suicide in his cell. As they had been in the previous century, concentration camps were established there, then in Southern Africa and many other colonies. In Britain, it was a time of whispers, for re-examining one's friends and neighbours. In schools, there was generally at least one committed Modernist master who would report any colleagues he perceived to be pedalling *decadent* or *inaccurate* teaching to the EA-dominated Local Education Authorities. Anxious to keep our jobs, the rest of us readily towed the line and amended our syllabuses in accordance with the new nationally coordinated instructions; we never quite seemed to cross the line of realising that we were peddling Modernist lies.

Despite the thrill of the fresh new vision that was gripping the country, there was an atmosphere of almost perpetual crisis. A plot to kill John Arthur by a bomb was narrowly averted, and at the trial several famous names from the political past were implicated, although Churchill himself had left for America by the time the police arrived at Chartwell to question him. The climax of it all, now commemorated in nursery-rhyme, song and pier-end tableau, took place on the night of 23 June 1933, just before an ailing King George and Queen Mary were due to head north from Old Buckingham Palace to Balmoral. A series of virtually simultaneous fire-bomb explosions crackled across the palace at ten o-clock that evening. Much older inside than out, conveniently stacked with draughty passages, plaster ceilings and ancient furniture, the vast building went up like a torch, lighting the overcast skies as far off as Kingston and Bromley with a baleful glow. In the atmosphere of permanent national crisis and suspicion, the fire and the Westminster Fire Brigade's abysmally slow response came as less

of a surprise than it should have done. It seemed only to prove that there was much that was deeply wrong with our nation, much that still needed to be done. Even the discovery of the charred bodies of King George and Queen Mary amid the glowing ruins seemed more emblematic than real; like a tragedy that took place long ago in some half-forgotten land.

There were many arrests, many strong measures, many disappearances after the fire, but the expected trial of the guilty parties never came, although by common consent they were Irish. It was as if this event was too large to be dragged into the dull glare of a specific reality and blamed on one particular group of men. In the classrooms, in back rooms, in the barbers and the chip shops, in the official files, on the EA posters, in our mistrust of strangers and our continued need for aggressive security, the fire at Old Buckingham Palace has currency to this day. Am I the only person who is convinced that it was done with the connivance of the Empire Alliance? No, of course not. But I imagine that the EA probably *did* find some Irishmen who wanted to score a point against a neighbouring country which openly supported Loyalist terrorists in their own north. With a gate left open, an easy passage through customs, things would just seem to fall into their laps. So much easier to get someone else to do your dirty work for you. It's the Modernist way.

Edward VIII was crowned King, and toasted warmly in Westminster's Great Hall by Mussolini, and Old Buckingham Palace in ruins remained at least as big a draw as it had been standing. Soon, sightseers began to clamber over the railings, searching for souvenir scraps of plaster as they wandered amid the blackened hallways and fallen beams. Of course, this was incredibly dangerous, but John Arthur captured the national mood when he suggested that, rather than have the old Place restored or demolished, the remains should be shored up and re-landscaped as a public park so that we could all go there. Few people had any affection for the drab acres of Green Park just across Resolution-nee-Constitution Hill, anyway. It would be the perfect site for a new palace.

For all its aspirational spires, towers and glittering domes, New Buckingham Palace looks rather like an immense greenhouse. Within a couple of years of its construction, it was overlooked by the Victory Spire at the corner of Park Lane. With London and the shining Thames spreading below and the certainties of Modernism filling their hearts, day trippers on

the viewing platform could peer down at the Palace through penny telescopes to see if they could see the King, or perhaps Queen Wallis. And they could wonder out loud why he had to marry *her* when she was, let's face it, used goods, and he could have had any fancy tart in the world for the asking.

Looking around for something more filling than smoked salmon sandwiches, light-headed as my belly growls and premonitions of pain begin to dance around me, I recognise a famous face as I make my way between the pools and fountains.

"Personally, I can't stand fiddling around with plates and standing up at the same time," he says affably. "Strikes me as a foreign habit."

I nod. Deputy Prime Minister Arkwright looks small and ordinary in the flesh, almost exactly like his pictures, even without the pipe and the Homburg. In fact, he really hasn't changed that much from the man I glimpsed standing with John Arthur all those years ago at the Cottage Spring. He was probably born cherubically plump, going-on-fifty.

"Hmm. Oxford," he says when I tell him who I am. "You know, I still wish I'd had a University education. And you know John from way back?"

"I taught him briefly when he was a child," I reply, conscious of the rainbowed sun gleaming through the fountain spray on Arkwright's blood-threaded cheeks, the strange intensity of his gaze, even as he chomps a handful of cocktail sausages. William Arkwright's the EA's comic turn, shouldering the blame for fiascos like the Cyprus Adventure that go so badly wrong they can't be hushed up. He's frequently seen on the arms of busty actresses. But he's Deputy Prime Minister *and* Home Secretary. He's the second most famous face in the country, even if he trails the first by a long way. He can hardly have come this far by accident.

"That's interesting," he says. "John's always so quiet about his past. When you get to meet him, you make sure you remind him of that. I keep telling him he should stop all those dreadful books being written about him." Another handful of sausages. Arkwright chews them, waving the greasy sticks. "Of course, no one gives a bugger about *my* upbringing. It's called charisma, I suppose. Some us have to make do with hard work."

"Did you ever think you'd get this far?"

Arkwright tilts his head as the water clatters over the green copper dolphins behind us. From the way he studies my lips, I realise he's slightly deaf. "What was it Cromwell said about those who don't know where they're going rising the furthest?"

"It was something like that."

"Well, he was right. I'm permanently lost, Mr. Brook. Permanently amazed. Although I know I don't look it…"

I nod. I'd never realised how oddly difficult it is to talk to someone famous, that sense of knowing them even though you don't, and the way Arkwright's looking at me as if there really is something shared between us… Then I realise what's happening—and immediately wish I hadn't. It's there in his eyes. It's in that smile of his and the way he studies me. After all these years, I've finally met someone else who knows the truth about John Arthur.

We gaze at each other. I swallow a sudden mouthful of saliva.

"What do you think of John Arthur, Mr. Brook?"

"What?"

"What do *you* think of John Arthur. I know it's been a long time, but do you like him personally?"

"He has my… admiration."

"Admiration." He slurps his wine and savours the word, then points the rim of the glass towards my face. "I suppose that's about as much as any of us can hope for…"

Deputy Prime Minister William Arkwright smiles at me. Then he pretends to see someone else he recognises over my shoulder, and waddles away through the rainbowed haze.

Still wandering half an hour later, re-fortified by tablets and what food I could find, grimly determined to make the most of these last days before dissolution or trial or public shame or private agony or whatever else awaits me, I come across Father Phelan standing alone in a long chilly room inside the Palace where the pillars are entwined with wrought-iron ivy. He catches the click of my new shoes on the tiled floor before I can head off in another direction.

"The Professor!" he calls, waving a bottle of Johnnie Walker. "Would you care for one? A wee sip? Sorry I'm without any glasses."

I shake my head and stand looking at him as he sways mirrored amid glass cases containing the relics of Empire; rifles, claymores and assegai, torn and bloodstained flags that men once gave their lives for.

"A fine fella, the King—but smaller in the flesh, don't you think, Professor? Can't say that I much admire his choice in women, either."

I nod, and make to turn away.

"Don't go yet, Professor! Don't go! I've been meaning to ask you. Did you *really* know John Arthur?"

"It was a long time ago."

"But without the crap? The lies?"

"The facts have got twisted about since, but yes, I did once know him."

"Thing is…" Father Phelan's eyes roll back in his head and his chin glistens as he glugs down another inch of whisky. "Thing is, I never knew the bugger at all. Will you fucking credit that?"

"Does that really matter? Everyone seems to think you did…"

"What do they know? It's right I was working in the East End about 1920, helping lads with the boxing. Terrible times, but a sweet church, a busy little congregation. Worked there for a few years before I got moved on after I had a bit of a bash up with the Bishop. Over this basically…" He waves the bottle, then plonks it down on the long low case he's standing beside, hands making rainbows smears across the glass. Inside, there's an antique cannon dredged up from the *Marie Rose.* "Then John Arthur takes over from that bastard Churchill, and it seems he spent some time boxing in the East End. You know how it is—you tell stories on Friday evening you can't even remember on Saturday. You think, what the fuck? That sounds good enough to be true. Who cares? Almost came to believe it myself, I did. Got my name and my face in the local paper…"

I nod. Faintly distorted, echoing along the crystal corridors, comes the thump of martial music.

"But it gets a bit scary. I'm expecting, you know, some kind of visit. When it comes, it's this fella from the KSG says he wants a quiet chat. Of course, I'm shitting myself, but I come out straight and tell him it's all a load of crap, I never even *saw* John Arthur let alone taught him boxing. But this fella is all understanding like. Says that it really doesn't matter. And then he starts to tell me about the times when I used to help them poor lads

in the East End. About me touching those sweet lads like I'm Jesus some kind of pervert…

"But the fella tells me all soft and kind like he's only just letting me know. Not that he believes it. Not that he gives a flying fuck either way. The deal is that I just have to keep spinning the same crap about having helped John Arthur at my boxing club. Basically do what I'm doing now…" He attempts to make an ironic bow. His hand slips on the glass case. He staggers. "Right here in front of the bloody King of fucking England."

"That doesn't seem so very harsh," I say. "Not when you think what's happened to some of your people, Father. Assuming you *are* Irish, a Roman Catholic."

"Doesn't, does it?" he mutters, ignoring my jibe. "But how about you, Professor? Where does that leave you with that fucking look in your eyes and your nice wee tablets, tottering on your silly stick? You bloody well actually knew him."

"Perhaps," I say, "the truth had to slip though somewhere. Perhaps even John Arthur understands that."

"But where! Where! You tell me the *truth*, Professor…!"

I walk along the corridor through splinters of flashing light, away from the clamour of Father Phelan's voice.

Captain Anderson stands waiting for me that evening in the New Dorchester's foyer. He's still in his uniform, and he smiles when he sees me emerging from the crowds, and shakes my hand again, his belts creaking slightly, smelling of starch and Brylcreem. Specks of weariness float before my eyes. Already, I'm wishing I hadn't agreed to come.

"It's good to see you, Mr. Brook."

"Just call me Geoffrey."

"I had the car brought around to the front…"

It's hard to tell as we stand outside the New Dorchester's colonnades that there's anything special about the neat black Ladybird that awaits us on the circled drive. Just the odd lettering of the numberplates and the absence of a tax disc.

"It's just a pool car," he says as he holds open the passenger door. "Being in the KSG, I don't get the chance to own many things…"

"You make it sound like a religious order."

Captain Anderson chuckles. The Ladybird's interior smells of wood and leather. My seat, as I run my hands across it, is soft as a spaniel's ears.

"Do you have any idea where you'd like to go?" he asks, pumping up the choke, jingling the keys.

"I thought I'd leave that up to you."

He isn't wearing a gun. Not obviously, anyway. "To be honest, I did take the precaution of booking somewhere. It's a bit out, but we should be against the traffic…"

We drive across the Thames, through Westminster and Chelsea and then out beyond Hammersmith and along the Great West Road past the bright new factories where Smiths make their crisps, and Macleans their toothpaste. The Hudson Car, complete with dummy passengers, floats floodlit a full hundred feet up. But beyond there, beyond the glare of the sodium street lights, the factories give way to building sites, and the buildings sites give way to ruined warehouses, strips of wasteground. Greater Britain is like a film set. Push hard enough, I keep telling myself, and it will collapse entirely.

Captain Anderson turns north at a roundabout beside a new neon-and-concrete Underground station. Soon, we are amid the suburbs. Here, much like the streets where my acquaintance lived in Oxford, although teeming in a far greater multitude, are the bay windows, the neat gardens, the half-jokily named pubs, the new rows of shops. Captain Anderson lights a Capstan and winds down his window. I lean out of my own before I start to cough, breathing in gardenfuls of air.

We arrive at a place called the New Galleon. It crouches on concrete beams at the edge of a reservoir as if preparing to stride across the black waters that the recent rains have provided. I'm surprised at the expanse of new metal in the car park. Bentleys and Rovers. The kind of Jags and Bristols, glinting blood-red or blue in this water-scented darkness, that are owned privately but take so much money, so much influence and simple *position* to get hold of that they might as well be official.

Inside, up the curved concrete ramp, it's all horse brasses, Constable prints—or possibly originals—flock wallpaper, Mantovani strings. Although he tells me he's never been here before, Captain Anderson seems at ease, peeling off the paper coaster from the base of his double whisky as we sit on tartan chairs around a low copper table and study the copper-plate

menu. There's a sense that everyone knows everybody else here. Wealth and success in Modernist Britain have become a kind of club.

"Quite the popular place to be," he observes as a dinner-jacketed waiter leads us to our reservation beside a wide plate glass window overlooking the reservoir and the flowing lights of the arterial road beyond. He nods discreetly. "I think that's Tommy Lawton over there. That man we passed on the way in—he's Charles Hill the Radio Doctor."

I have no idea who Captain Anderson means, but I follow his gaze in the window's reflection. He is far from being the only member of the KSG here either, although as a captain he's the most junior.

"I don't know if I'm supposed to say this, ah, Tony, but I'd like the meal to be my treat. I can easily afford the bill."

"Don't worry. I have a standing imprest. No one will query it."

He clicks his fingers and orders another whisky, then lights a fresh cigarette from his last. After this long day and my experiences of mixing too many tablets with too much alcohol, I settle for iced water, which smells, as I raise it to my lips, like that swimming pool from which Tony Anderson emerged. I study him now, still hardly able to take in how ordinary these KSG people are when you get close to them. He's still young enough to have a small whitehead showing at the corner of his mouth.

"Did you really enjoy my articles?" I ask as we wait for the food.

In reply, he gives me a passable run-through of the subjects I covered in those Saturday pages. He's obviously been well-briefed, but it's like listening to a student regurgitating his studies for an oral exam in the certain knowledge that it'll all be forgotten a day later. I notice that his second or possibly third whisky's already down to the ice.

The food, when it finally comes, is a disappointment. I'd imagined that the plain names and descriptions on the New Galleon's menu were a double-bluff; surely boiled potatoes, beef and swede really couldn't mean *just* that? But it does. Tony's meal is a steaming heap of mashed potato, a sprinkling of parsley over cod from which he has to carefully extract the bones. So this is what the fabulously rich and famous eat at dinner. Of course, John Arthur likes only plain food himself. Francis, I remember, was exactly the same.

We plod through the pudding.

“I’m sorry,” Tony Anderson sighs, standing his spoon up in the custard. “This place was recommended to me. I nearly went instead for this Italian place down in Bayswater.” He smiles. His face has relaxed somewhat with the whisky. “It’s all garlic, those big pepper grinders, candle smoke on the ceiling…”

“Perhaps some other time.”

“Yes…” He gazes at me. Those blue eyes. I can warm to him more easily now that he’s given up the pretence of being interested in *Figures Of History.*

“Still, Tony, I’ve enjoyed our meal.”

“There’s no hurry to go back to the New Dorchester, though, is there?” He sounds almost hopeful. “We could drive into central London first. Take a stroll. See the sights. This of all nights, there must be plenty going on…”

He signs for the bill after downing his last whisky, and I follow him back outside, collecting my coat, my stick, chewing on a little mint that looks and tastes like one of my fat tablets. The little man who sweeps in past us through the swing doors is clearly Lupino Lane, and the car park is fuller than ever. A seagull is mewing. The London air whispers and rustles around us, pulling me this and that way with fingers of weariness, hope, expectancy.

“Why did you join the Knights of Saint George?” I ask Tony as he starts the Ladybird up and backs it out from beside a Bentley Convertible.

“I just wanted something better for the future,” he says.

“Isn’t that what everyone says?”

“I know…” He pulls a face as we wait at the junction on the main road. “…It’s a cliché.” The traffic lights shine red, orange, then green. He pulls off. These simple commands—from machines, even—which everyone now obeys.

“Does that mean it’s true?” I ask.

Slipping into the traffic’s flow, talking more easily now that we’re no longer face to face and half his mind is on the driving, Tony Anderson tells me how he was brought up in the Wirral just over the Mersey from Liverpool, the same kind of nothing-place where most of us start our lives. His father had been a shopkeeper—hardware; one of those emporiums filled with tin baths, stick-on soles, replacement broom handles, lino, shoe polish, patent floor cleaners and just about everything else imaginable.

Tony Anderson, who's twenty-five now, was born at a hard time, something that's so easy to forget about his generation when you see them now, so at ease in the world they have created. His first memories are about the end of the War: defeat, depression, unemployment, hyper-inflation, limbless ex-soldiers sleeping and dying on the streets. Tony and his father, mother and two elder sisters lived above the shop in three small rooms. They should have been alright, providing basic domestic supplies to the large urban population of Birkenhead. But the business just went down and down. The customers couldn't pay. The supplier's prices went haywire. They ended up accepting credit just to create the impression that they were busy, but at the end of the day there was no way out. No food. No money.

Tony's father was beaten up on the orders of the moneylenders he'd gone to in an effort to keep going. The moneylenders were Jewish; it wasn't unusual for minor financiers to be Jewish in those days. His father tried turning to other trades; offering cheap groceries which he went down to collect from the market ten miles away by handcart. That didn't work either.

"The shop's still there," Tony says, pulling past a slow-moving Colman's Mustard van as we bowl along the Fulham Road. "Or at least the building is. It's a barbers now, although you can still see our name on the gable bricks if you look carefully. My father was a good businessman, not afraid to do new things and stock new products, to change with the times. He did his best, his absolute best. By everything that was right and fair, he should have succeeded. But you're a historian, Mr. Brook—you probably understand this better than me. There are some things you can't fight against. They just steam-roller over you no matter what you do about it. It's just—what?—the force of history?"

"That's as good a name for it as any."

"My father struggled on for a while. He went up to look for work in Bolton. Then Sheffield. He was much too old to be a labourer by then, but that was what mostly he did, and sent us what money he'd saved. Then we just stopped getting the letters. My mother had to go down to collect his belongings. She would never talk about it—I still don't know quite how my father died…"

"So you joined the EA?"

"I just wanted to belong to something that made sense. I was sixteen when John Arthur came into power, and by then we were all living in a

single room. One of the first things John Arthur did was introduce new scholarships and City Colleges—did you know that? And he made the benefits system work for the people who really needed it. He gave me and millions of others a chance. I found I could go back to school. And I found that I was good at learning. Good at sports. Good at dealing with people. It was as if it had been a secret that people had kept from me until then. So I was happy to become a party member. I felt I owed it to John Arthur personally. He virtually saved my life."

"To get into the KSG, though… There must have been a lot of competition?"

"Of course," Tony grins, still proud of the memory of all that he's achieved.

Leicester Square is brighter than daylight as we crawl around it with the rest of the traffic. Long gone are the days of my own furtive wanderings here; a quick exchange of looks and words, then back to a room around Russell Square, the smell of the stairs, tramlines flashing like lightening beyond the curtainless windows, the sag of the bed and the trickle of soapy water as we size each other up and privately regret our decision.

It would be hard to find a place to park this Ladybird in central London tonight if Tony wasn't able to ignore the signs. We step out into the crowds and are carried with them towards the fairground that's been set up in Regents Park. There's the sickly smell of candy floss and soaring, sparkling lights. Sleepy, excited children, their sticky faces shining with sugar and grease, nag their parents for a last ride on one or another of the vast machines of fear and joy, then scream as the wheels rise and turn and clanging trains swoop down from the sky. The older lads nudge each other excitedly at the sight of Tony Anderson in his KSG uniform. When they grow up, they all want to be him. Tony finds a drinks tent and has the barman—who notices his uniform easily and comes over straight away, despite the press of the crowds—refill the steel whisky flask he produces. I shake my head when he offers it to me, and watch as he slugs it back.

He seems absorbed in his own life and his own history as he walks beside me, his arm brushing my own; but I still find it hard to squeeze the real person into this uniform, the fact of what he is. Further out beyond the stalls and the tents and the rides lies an open space and a vast bonfire, throwing sparks into a grey-glowing sky. I buy us both hot potatoes from a

crooked-chimneyed oven. After the New Galleon's dire food, they taste like hot new bread, salt and honey. Tony and I stand at the long ropes and watch the bonfire's spiralling antics as butter melts down our chins.

Two Spitfires swoop out of the night, low over the bonfire, agitating the sparks, trailing ribbons of smoke whilst lads stripped to the gleaming waist climb over each other to make trembling pyramids, marshalled by absurd middle-aged men in khaki shorts and broad-brimmed hats. Just as I'm wondering what else goes on in the ridged canvas tents that have been set up behind the zoo, I sense that I'm being stared at from across the ring. It's Christlow, his face slippery with firelight as he marshals the next shining cluster of Modernist youth preparing for some gymnastic feat or other. His eyes flick away from mine when I attempt to smile at him. He looks around as if in panic, then stumbles back into the trembling heat.

"Perhaps we should go," I say to Tony, and we push into quieter areas of the fair just as the London Police Alsatian Display Team begins to leap through flaming hoops. Everything seems tired now. Lads are yelling fuck-this and fuck-that at each other. Couples lie coiled like heaps of rope in the shadows between the tents. The toilet tents have turned nasty. Back at the Ladybird, the streets are almost quiet.

The New Dorchester seems worn out, too. Voices are low, and all but one of the bars have closed. The night staff are out with mops and vacuum cleaners in some of the communal spaces, doing their night duties. Tony Anderson stands close beside me as we wait for the lift.

"Don't mind if I come up, do you?" he says to the burnished steel door as it slides open. He presses the right button for my floor. The cables draw us up the dark shaft. I can smell the whisky coming off his flesh.

I unlock the door of my room for him. We step inside. The main lights, too hard, too bright, flicker on. Everything here is immaculate, unchanged. Saint George is still at prayer in his forest of fragmented glass. The sheets of my huge bed are drum-taut. I sleepwalk over to the tall ash-and-ebony cabinet and pour out two drinks from the first bottle that comes to hand. I watch as Tony takes his and swallows, and then force myself to knock back my own. His face is paler now, dotted with silvery beads of perspiration.

"You don't need to do this, you know."

"That's okay." He smiles and licks his lips. "Perhaps I could borrow your bathroom…"

I shrug and wander away from him, propping myself half-up on the vast bed as he puts down his drink, loosens his collar, steps out of his shoes. I reach to the line of buttons and make the lights grow dimmer. Saint George fades, the forest darkens. His face is a picture of piety, a younger version of John Arthur's; or Francis Eveleigh when he wasn't John Arthur and the world still seemed full of love and life and hope and honour. That night on the train to Scotland. *Clatter tee tee.* Telegraph lines rising, falling. The scent of the smoke and the feel of far away. The incredible pressure of flesh against flesh. He took everything then, did Francis—my money, my dreams, my love—and he's been giving it all back to me ever since.

Out of habit, Tony closes the bathroom door as he finishes stripping for his shower. Then he holds it open again on the pretence of asking me about the towels, and leaves it that way as he turns and steps out of his underpants, giving me a glimpse of his parted bum, the droop of his balls, the entire way that he is made. Realising that I still have my drink in my hand, I take a swig of it, feeling it burn in my throat—a little touch of blessed reality.

Tony turns on the shower and steps in. I watch him broken and multiplied in reflection of the many bathroom mirrors as he soaps himself. The water clatters, dribbling from the points of his elbows, the tip of his cock. He has a wide, strong back, has Tony. He's more beautiful than any man I've ever had—including, yes, even including Francis. Yet I'm somehow reminded instead of those sour stairways after a pickup in Leicester Square; those cheap, uncurtained back rooms, and the sense of regret that came even before the beginning. By the time Tony comes out again, wrapped modestly enough in a New Dorchester towelling robe, I feel tired. Washed up. Washed out. Dead or dying.

"I don't want you in that way, Tony. I almost wish I did. But…"

"That's okay." He rubs a towel across his sticking-up hair, trying hard not to look relieved. He has his blood group tattooed across his upper arm; the small blue circle stretches and contracts as he moves.

"Can they really give you *orders* to do this?" I ask.

"It isn't like that."

"What is it like then?"

He flops down beside me on the bed, smelling of soap, wet hair, clean flesh, new laundry. "It's just a suggestion that's made…"

“Why you?”

“I didn’t tell you how I made the money that helped keep my mother and sisters after Dad died, did I? It was easy enough. I took the ferry across to the docks at Liverpool. If nothing else, I always knew I was good looking—a pretty boy. I never thought I was doing it for any other reason but that. But then I had a fling with a Major a couple of years ago when I was in Rhodesia. We were bored, lonely… We were found out, of course.”

“That woman at the pool you waved to…?”

“I can hope, I suppose.”

He lies back on the bed, his broad arms crooked up, his hands clasped beneath his neck. Bits of him are sticking out; young tender flesh—but it no longer matters. I lie beside him, just relishing the sense of simple human closeness for what, if things go according to plan, will probably be the last time in my life. Together, we stare up at the ceiling.

Tony nudges me later from a doze. He’s dressed again, and clearly has been sitting watching me from the side of the bed whilst I mutter and drool until—what? Three-forty, for God’s sake. Saint George is still at prayer in his darkened forest. The Bells’ bottle is half empty.

“You’d better get undressed and in between the sheets,” he tells me. “I was told to be gone before the morning.”

“Before…?”

He shrugs. Smiles. I’m so glad we didn’t spoil this night by fucking each other. “There’s going to be an air raid alert first thing.”

“For real?”

“Of course not.” His hand touches my arm. “It’s just another part of the show.”

I sit up, dragging the shot-silk coverlet with me in spears of static and pain. “That explains why there’s only Westminster Abbey down on the itinerary…” I mutter as I look around for my tablets and shake them out and gulp them down.

“Could be.”

“You must have seen some action, Tony.”

His face is a picture for a moment. He thinks we’re back to sex again. “Yes. I was in Rhodesia. One of the first.”

“What was that like?”

“It was hardly a proper war. We just walked in through Bechuanaland. Half the country wanted us there—whites especially. Arrested a few League of Nations soldiers and put them back on the boat to Belgium…”

“But that’s not what you’re for, though, is it? You’re the KSG. A political force…”

Tony’s gaze trails away from mine across the carpet. The rumour was that ten to fifteen thousand people vanished in the first weeks of British re-occupation of Rhodesia. They were gathered up in trucks by local “Modernist sympathisers”, guided and supported by the KSG. They were taken to camps to be tortured, questioned, killed, whilst refugees poured along the roads and old enmities were settled. *Blam blam* as history grinds on and flies gather over the corpses. The pattern, by now, is familiar enough.

“It’s not worth it, is it, Tony?”

“What?”

“What you’re doing. Get out of the KSG while you can, give your life a chance.”

He stands up, finally almost drunk as he places his tumbler down on the polished bedside table a little too carefully. He crosses the room to pick up his jacket. “It’s too late for that,” he says, smiling lopsidedly as he brushes at some imaginary fluff from the lapels and pulls it on. Buttons jingle as he tugs at the sleeves, pulls the pockets straight and smoothes and buckles the belts. He combs his hair, stoops to lace his shoes, re-checks his already perfect parting in the mirror.

Once again as he leaves my room, even now half-marching, dark angel of death and delusion, young male beauty personified, Captain Tony Anderson of the KSG scares me.

I was summoned to the Headmaster’s office at the Friary School mid-way through the 2B’s morning natural history lesson. This was in 1932 and the *Daily Sketch* and I had, after six relatively glorious years, finally parted company. My moment of fame had been and gone, I was 52, already the second oldest master at the school, and I’d began thinking about retirement, of selling my mother’s house and moving to some quiet cottage with a view of the sea that I might just be able to afford if I lived frugally. On that particular day, I was covering for Green, and had just about run through my

sum total of knowledge about the life cycle of the cabbage white. Ink pellets were flying. Desk lids were banging. Even now that John Arthur had succeeded in stabilising the economy and staff weren't being fired quite so regularly, a summons to the Head was usually a bad sign. Today, though, I was almost grateful.

Still, all the usual suspicions went through my mind as I waited outside the oak door for the minute that it always seemed to take Harks to realise someone had knocked on it. Poor results, perhaps, in the new Basic Grade exams? Or my sucking off that foundry worker outside the Bull at Shenstone last Saturday evening?

"Come in!" Harks shouted, seemingly quicker than usual.

Inside, it was a shock to find that he was actually out of his desk, standing as if to greet me. It was a running joke in the senior staff room that Harks didn't have a lower portion to his body.

"Ah, Brook!" Since my *Daily Sketch* years, Harks had decided that my employment records were at fault, and addressed me in all written correspondence—which was his usual way of dealing with people—as Brook without the *e*. I doubt if he even knew what my first name was. I certainly didn't know his. "Take a pew, take a pew. Mrs. Cringle will be in with some tea in a moment. She's promised to see if she can rustle up some biscuits…"

I slumped down, totally confused.

"I've received a letter this morning," Harks began, rubbing the cream vellum between his fingers as if he still didn't quite believe it. "From the Vice Chancellor at Oxford. It seems that they're seeking to widen their, ah, *remit.* Trying to get in some fresh educational blood. Your name, Brook, has been mentioned…"

A cool day, the year's first frost covering the allotments. The sky a pale English blue. The bells, the bicycles. That odd little man Christlow who called himself a scout but was in fact the personal servant to a few of us dons. Worn stone steps. Faded luxury. Casement windows. The college principal Cumbernald taking me for lunch at the White Horse jammed between Blackwells and Trinity as if he really had every reason to welcome me, fraud that I clearly was. An applewood fire was burning in the snug's grate, I remember, and Cumbernald told me that he was newish to the

college himself, and that we'd make a fine team together as we ate sharp ham-and-cheddar rolls and a few of the other dons wafted in from dim smoky corners to give me their own Varsity tips. I confided to Cumbernald about the book I'd always planned to write, and he nodded gravely. By the time we'd opted—yes, why not?—for a third pint of Pedigree, I didn't feel like an impostor. I felt as if I was gliding at last into the warm currents of a stream along which my life had always been destined to carry me.

I remember that the news vendors were selling a Special Extra Early edition of the *Oxford Evening News* as we walked back along High and Cumbernald regaled me with a few of his own supply of Oxford stories. He bought a copy and we stood and read it together. Other people were doing the same, nearly blocking the street. It had just been announced that a British Expeditionary Force had landed at Dronacarney north of Dublin, and that a task-force fleet led by HMS Hood had already accepted the surrender of Belfast, barring a little fighting around the Falls Road, without needing to do more than turn her guns upon that loyal City. I think Cumbernald actually whooped and punched the air. That was most people's reaction. It was a fine day to be British.

More fine days were to follow. There was easy victory in Ireland. The commemorative Victory Tower went up and up in London, and word was that the contract had been let even before the troops set out, such was the confidence that now pervaded Greater Britain. I, meanwhile, shivered pleasurably at Christmas to the soaring music of the choir at Kings. And I worked hard. For these new and nervous students who entered my rooms clutching essays and reading lists I became what I had always been, which was a teacher. I did my best and, amazingly, my best was often enough. There were gatherings, panelled rooms, mulled wine in winter, mint teas and Japanese wallpapers in the spring, cool soft air off the river on long walks alone. Our forces aided Franco's victory over the communists in Spain, and we resigned from the League of Nations. The Cyprus Adventure came and went. Britain re-took Rhodesia. I bought myself an expensive new gramophone.

The rest of the world found it easier to treat John Arthur as a kind of Fascist straight-man to the comical Mussolini. France, Germany and the Lowlands were too busy forming themselves into a Free Trade Community whilst the USA under Roosevelt, when it wasn't worrying about the threat

in the Far East from a resurgent Japan, remained doggedly isolationist. In the Middle East, Britain's canny re-alignment of Egypt's King Farouk in the Modernist mould, and his recent conquest of Palestine with the help of British military advisors, were seen as no more than the par for the course in that troubled region. After all, Britain was behaving no more aggressively than she had throughout most of modern history. Even now that the whole of Kent has been turned into a military camp as a precaution against some imagined Franco-German threat, the world still remains determined to think the best of us.

Meanwhile, and despite all the puzzlements and disappointments, I grew to love Oxford almost as much in reality as much as the dream. Eights Week. The Encænia Procession. Midnight chimes. The rainy climate. The bulldogs in their bowler hats checking college gardens for inebriate sleepers. The Roofs And Towers Climbing Society.

History went on. The Jews were re-located. Gypsies and tramps were forcibly housed. Homosexuals were invited to come forward for treatment. Of course, I was a panicked for a while by *that*—but by then I had my acquaintance, our discreet messages on the cubicle wall at the Gents beside Christ Church Meadow, our casual buggerings when he'd do it to me first and then afterwards I'd sometimes do it to him—my soft and easy life. I had my desk, my work, my bed. I had my books, the tea rooms, the gables, the cupolas, the stares of the Magdalene deer, the chestnuts in flower, music from the windows of buildings turned ghostly in the sunlight, young voices in the crystalline dusk and the scent of ancient earth from the quads.

I was dazed. I was dazzled. Without even trying, I had learned how to forget.

16

I AM DRAGGED BACK towards morning by sleek sheets, a clean sense of spaciousness that cannot possibly be Oxford, and an anguished howling. My head buzzes, the light ripples. London, of course. London. The New Dorchester…

I fumble for my tablets on the bedside table as the sirens moan, then in the drawer beside it where beneath a Bible and complimentary New Dorchester pens and envelopes lies a card detailing WHAT TO DO IN CASE OF A FIRE OR AIR RAID. I'm blinking and rubbing my eyes at it when the door to my room swings open.

"Sorry about this, Brook." Reeve-Ellis, already in his school tie and cardigan, leans swaying on the handle. He has PC T3308 in tow.

"Frightful cock-up on this of all days. You know what these bongo-bongo players are like—haven't even *heard* of an air raid—probably think it's the Great White God coming down to impregnate their daughters. Still, we've got them all going down the stairs now—even Father Phelan, which was no mean feat, the state that he's in. So I thought I'd better look in on you as well, just to make sure you've got the message. There's a good man. Just pop on that dressing gown…"

It's pandemonium along the corridors. Half past seven in the morning and people are flapping by in odd assortments of clothing with pillow-creases on their cheeks, electrified hair. Most of them seem to be smiling, though. An air raid's the sort of occasion that breaks down social barriers even at the New Dorchester, and no one believes it's the real thing.

"Pretty chaotic, I'm afraid," Reeve-Ellis steers me through the swirling roar of the crowded main atrium where hotel staff are holding up signs and arrows. "A lot easier if we go this way and find ourselves some peace and quiet."

He, PC T3308 and I struggle against the flow until we reach an eddy beside the hotel souvenir shop where the crowds are thinner and another PC —K2910 according to his shoulder badge—is standing guard at the door marked NO ADMITTANCE that Reeve-Ellis led me into two days ago. PC K2910 follows us as we go in, then locks the door from the inside. The

howl of the siren, the sound of people moving, suddenly grows faint. This early in the offices, there are no phones ringing, no typewriters clicking. But for the three men who are with me, I'm suddenly alone.

"Along here," Reeve-Ellis says, shoving his hands into his cardigan pockets. PC T3308 strides ahead of me. PC K2910 keeps just behind. Their shoes squeak. They smell faintly of rubber. Reeve-Ellis holds opens the door with an EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY sign just past his office that leads to a damp and dimly-lit concrete tunnel. The door slams shut behind us, setting off ripples of echoes. Here, at last, the New Dorchester's carpets and luxury give out. The passage begins to slope down. There's a faint growling of some kind of motor. Water drips from tiny stalactites on the roof. The air smells gassy and damp. A chill runs down my neck.

We reach a gated lift, which PC K2910 drags shut, then activates with his keys, clanking us down past coils of pipework to some kind of railway platform, although this isn't the normal Underground; the tunnel at each end is too small.

"Dreadfully uncomfortable, I'm afraid," Reeve-Ellis says as an earthy breeze touches our faces and the rails begin to sing. "Temporary expedient, of course…"

An automatic train slides in, wheezing and clicking with all the vacant purpose of a toy, hauling a line of empty hoppers behind it. The final one has pull-down wooden seats, and a notice that someone has picked away at to read USE OF POST OFFICE NEL ONLY. PC K2910 hops in first, then helps Reeve-Ellis clamber over. I try taking a step back, wondering about possibilities of escape. PC T3308 bumps shoulders with me.

"Might as well just get in, sir," he says, offering a large, nail-bitten hand.

Hunched in our toy train, we slide into the tunnel. I'm conscious of my slippered feet, my bare calves and ankles beneath the dressing gown, my gaping pyjamas, the huge sliding weight of the Thames that I imagine now lies above us. Our breath smokes, and is snatched away. Grey wires along the walls rise and fall, rise and fall. In what light there is, with me squashed on one side against Reeve-Ellis's bony body, I study the two policemen who squat opposite me. PC T3308 is bigger and older, with the jowelled meaty face and body of an old-fashioned copper. PC K2910 is freckled, red-headed, thin; he seems too young, in fact, to be a policeman at all. Falling

through my head in rhythm with the clicking rails, I can hear the cheery voice of some *Look At Life* commentator booming out over the one-and-nines. A new tunnel under London… Mail from Inverness and Calcutta… Parcels from Adelaide and Sutton Coldfield… Postal orders and love letters, saucy post cards, holiday photographs, birthdays and bits of wedding cake, car licences, good and bad news, hopeful competition entries, letters from the bank manager…

We disembark at another mail station, and travel upwards in another gated lift. Then, suddenly, the walls are almost new—fresh painted the same municipal green that once covered the walls of the Gents beside Christ Church Meadow, and somehow, as the bare overhead lights slide across it, scarred with similar marks and messages. PC T3308 grips my arm. There are doors leading into offices, but apart from the odd broken-legged chair, the place is empty, abandoned. We're still deep underground.

"It's in here," sighs Reeve-Ellis, opening a door after PC K2910 has found the right key. He clicks on the light. There are three chairs and a desk, one battered four-drawer filing tin cabinet with tea or rust stains down the front. A pre-redesign map of the London Underground sags on rusty pins from the notice board. Fat pipes run across the ceiling.

PC K2910 shuts and then re-locks the door. PC T3308 widens his stance and folds his arms.

"You may as well sit down, Brook." Reeve-Ellis points to the chair on the far side of the desk, facing out from the wall. It's a standard tubular-frame thing, although old and stained, and I notice as my body settles into it and my shaking hands reach out to grip the armrests that it gives off a sour, unfortunate smell. The air is warm in here, almost swimmingly hot. The heat comes, I suspect, from those thick green-painted pipes spanning the ceiling. We must be near the boilers that service this seemingly empty building. I can sense—more a feeling than a sound, a grating hum that comes up through the floor into my slippered feet and ripples over my skin.

Reeve-Ellis clears his throat. Brushing the dust from the corner of the desk, he hitches at the knee-creases of his flannel trousers and sits down. "May as well get on," he snaps at the two PCs.

"Whatever all of this is," I say as PCs T3308 and K2910 exchange glances, "You should know that I'm a dying man. I've no close friends or

relatives. I have terminal cancer—you can look it up in my NHS records. I have nothing to lose."

"I'm afraid," Reeve-Ellis says, "that it doesn't work like that." He tucks in his legs to let PC T3308 and PC K2910 past him.

"Right or left handed, sir?" asks older, burlier PC T3308; the one with the bitten nails, the big stevedore's hands.

I look up at him, his thick head haloed by the bare-bulbed light. The gun and the truncheon and the handcuffs that hang from his belt look like sexual appendages. "I didn't think this was the sort of thing the London Constabulary specialised in," I say, and glance over at Reeve-Ellis, who's watching from his perch at the far edge of the desk. "I always imagined this was all left to the KSG nowadays."

PC T3308 rumbles a laugh. "We don't need those fancy boys, sir. Piss-poor at anything, from what I've heard. Was it the right or left-handed that you said you were?"

"Come *on*," Reeve-Ellis mutters, and reaches in the top pocket of his shirt. He offers me a pen. "Take this will you, old man?" Stupidly, I reach for it. "There you are. Right-handed. Most people are. Just a question of using a bit of intellect."

PC T3308 blinks slowly. Unruffled, he leans across and lifts my right hand from the arm rest, splaying it palm-up at the edge of the desk. He sits down on it, his fat-trousered bottom pushed virtually in my face. I can't see them now, but I can feel my fingers dangling in the cool air beyond the edge of the desk. Even with the pressure he's now applying, it's hard to keep them still.

I hear the rasp of a belt buckle. Something jingles. A raised truncheon appears above PC T3308's head, and I glance over at Reeve-Ellis; but he's looking away now, pruning his nails. I imagine that they'll start asking me questions at any moment, long before they actually do anything, now that the threat of violence has clearly been made.

"If this is—" I begin just as, with small a grunt of effort, PC K2910 brings the truncheon down across the fingers of my right hand.

The world shivers and breaks apart for an amazed moment, then re-forms in jagged pain.

Alone now, I can hear Reeve-Ellis's voice as he talks to someone on the telephone in a nearby room. The bell bings. He dials again. *Yes. No. Not yet. Just as you say*… I can tell from the sound of his voice that he's speaking to a superior.

I'm cradling my right hand. It's the most precious thing in the entire world. My index finger is bent back at approximately 45 degrees just above the first joint, and it's swelling and discolouring as I watch. The first and middle fingers are swelling rapidly too, although they could simply be torn and bruised rather than broken.

This is terrible—as bad as I could have imagined. Yet I've known pain before. I broke my wrist once after slipping on the tiles in embarrassing circumstances in the Gents' in a pub in Banbury. And I've had plenty of opportunity lately to get more used to pain. The thing about torture isn't the pain, I decide between bouts of shivering. It's the simple sense of wrongness.

The keys jingle. Reeve-Ellis and the two PCs re-enter the room. They smell faintly rainy—of cigarettes and tea and London traffic and ordinary mornings. Reeve-Ellis rakes a chair towards the desk.

"I won't piss you about, Brook," he says. "I'm no expert, anyway, at this kind of thing. Thanks to you, I and my two friends here have to practise this grisly art whilst some jumped-up AS from Marsham Street takes over my office on temporary and geographical promotion."

"I can't say you have my sympathy."

"Be that as it may…"

PC K2910 extracts his note pad and pencil. With that freckled narrow face of his, he still looks far too young. PC T3308 leans back against the wall and nibbles at his nails. A sick tremor runs though me.

"Perhaps you could begin," Reeve-Ellis continues, "by telling us exactly why you're here. What all of this is about…"

"I don't see how I can tell you when I don't have any idea. *You* brought me here. I'm supposed to be an honoured guest, and then you…"

But almost before I've started, Reeve-Ellis is getting up from his chair, sighing in weary irritation. He's nodding to PC K2910 to find the keys to let him out of the room again. Once he's gone, the two PC's glance at each other, and come around to me from opposite sides of the desk. Their hook their hands beneath my armpits.

“If you’ll just stand up, sir.”

I try to grab the chair’s armrest, but it slides from under me and the fingers of my right hand catch on the belt of my dressing gown. The world greys for a moment, then I’m standing upright and the PCs are moving me towards the old grey filing cabinet in the corner of the room. In a grunting ballet, PC K2910 bends to slide open the top drawer. I feel the agonising pull of my tendons as they straighten out my right arm and hold my hand over the open drawer as PC T3308 raises his boot and kicks it shut.

“These things have a pattern,” Reeve-Ellis says, sitting in front of me again. “You have to accept that, Brook. And it’s always effective, although I’m sure that to you it appears crude. But what you must realise is that there’s only one outcome. Which is you telling me everything.”

Weeping, gently rocking in my chair, I stare back at his blurred shape.

“So now that I’ve been honest with you, Brook, perhaps you could be honest with me.” A soft click, and there on the table, although stretched and blotched to my eyes as if in some decadent non-realist painting, lies the pistol, the Webley Bulldog gun.

“If you could just tell me how and why you got this thing, and what it was doing in your suitcase at the New Dorchester.”

“It’s a relic,” I say. “It belonged to a friend of mine who died in the War.”

“Can you tell me his name?”

I hesitate. A billow of black agony enfolds me. “Francis Eveleigh. As I say, he’s dead.”

“Where did he live?”

I tell him the name of the street in Lichfield, and then—what could it matter now?—that of Francis’s parents’s house in Louth. “It came back with his effects when he died at the Somme in 1916,” I add. “I have no idea how he got hold of it.”

“And the bullets?”

“They came with the effects as well.”

“They’re not standard Army issue.” Reeve-Ellis strokes his chin. “But I know how chaotic it was over there. So it all came to you, this gun, these bullets, as a memento of this Eveleigh fellow?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve kept them with you ever since?”

“Yes.”

“Ever used the gun?”

“No… Well, a couple of times. I wanted to make sure that it still worked.”

“Did it?”

“I’m no expert. It seemed to fire.”

“I see. And what did you intend to do with it?”

“What do you think?”

Reeve-Ellis frowns. “I thought we’d got past that stage, old man.”

“I intended to kill John Arthur.”

Reeve-Ellis nods. He seems unimpressed. Behind him, PC K2910 frowns, licks his pencil, makes a note. Somewhere, a phone is ringing.

“It was Christlow,” I say, “wasn’t it?”

“Who?”

“Christlow, my scout. He told you about the gun.”

“I don’t see that that matters.”

“You don’t deny it?”

“We seem to be forgetting here exactly who is asking the questions.” Reeve-Ellis smiles. I sense that the two PCs behind him are loosening their stance. Perhaps all this will soon be ending.

“And to recap—the ammunition?”

“What?”

“The bullets—the ammunition. Where did you say you got them?”

“They came with it…” I take a breath. The swollen lump that was my hand is a blazing sun. I am just its circling planet. “With the gun.”

“With the gun?”

“With the gun.” I swallow. “Although I can’t see that it matters now. You know what I planned to do, and all the rest of it was all a long time ago. You can see that, can’t you?”

Reeve-Ellis is slowly shaking his head. “I’m sorry, old man, but that really won’t do.”

“I told you at the start that I have nothing to lose. Why do you think I planned to kill John Arthur? Why do you think I brought the gun?”

“There’s really little point in my bothering unless you can do better than this…” Reeve-Ellis stands up. “I’m sorry.”

I nod and drowse in and out of some terrible dream. There are more questions, the nightmare of the filing cabinet again. Pain's a strange thing. There are moments when it seems there has never been anything else in the whole universe, and others when it lies almost outside you. I think of Christ on his cross, of Torquemada and Matthew Hopkins. All those lives. And even now. Even now. To the same old gods and the new secular ones. In Japan. In Spain. In Russia. In Britain. I'm not lost at all. Not alone. A million twisted ghosts are with me.

I flinch as the lock slides and the door opens. Alone this time, Reeve-Ellis sits down.

"I was once John Arthur's lover," I swallow back a lump of vomit, trying hard not to cough. "I bet you didn't know that? I *was* his lover…"

Reeve-Ellis frowns at me. A loose scab breaks open as the flesh on my hand parts and widens. The sensation is quite disgusting. A fresh dribble of blood patters the floor.

"I was asked to show you these," he says, laying out a brown manila envelope.

"I can't imagine that there's anything…" I gasp. "…Sufficiently compromising…" I'd almost laugh at the idea if doing so wasn't excruciating.

"It's not *that*," he says, almost angrily.

I do my best to focus as Reeve-Ellis opens the envelope up and slides four photographs out. He swivels them around and lines them up on the desk before me like playing cards, grainy enlargements of four faces and upper bodies, all apparently naked. Three are white-lit against a white cloth background; the fourth—a man, I realise when I've sorted out the approximate details of these gaunt, near-bald, blotched and virtually sexless figures—is standing against a wall. They are each holding in spider-thin hands a longer version of the kind of slot-in numbers that churches use for hymns, although these numbers are longer, dotted by brackets and sub-divisions: a tribute to the power of bureaucracy. My vision blurs. A large part of me doesn't want to recognise these people.

"How do I know," I say, "that they're still alive?"

"You don't."

I gaze back at the photographs. Eyes that fix the camera without seeing, as if they can fill up with so many sights that light is no longer

absorbed. My acquaintance, he looks younger, older, beyond time, with the thin bridge of his nose, the ridges of his cheeks, the taut drum-like skin, the sores. His wife, his children, are elfin, fairy people, blasted through into nothingness by the light that pours around them. Barely there at all…

"These people—"

"—I was just asked to show you, Brook. I don't know who they are, what they mean to you. Their names…"

The lock on the door slides back. Both PCs stand close to the wall without a word, watching me and Reeve-Ellis.

"Are you proud of this?" I say to them all. "Is this how you wanted it to be in the Summer Isles?"

"The *where*?" Reeve-Ellis looks weary, defensive, frustrated. In spite of everything, I still have this feverish sense that there's some part of the equation of what's happening here that I haven't yet glimpsed.

"They're dead anyway, aren't they—this family?" I say. "I don't understand you people. Even if I could save them, where would they go, how would they live—what kind of life?"

Reeve-Ellis shakes his head. "Just concentrate on telling us everything, old man. Who knows what might happen then—who you might be able to help. Don't worry about thinking you can shield someone. Don't worry about betrayal. Believe me, all of that's in the past. Your plans and your schemes, the simple life you probably thought you were living. Do you really think you could get even *this* close to John Arthur with a pistol unless someone wanted you to? Still, it must have been fun while it lasted, playing your stupid little game."

He picks up the photos, taps them together and slides them back into the envelope. PCs T3308 and K2910 move towards me, grip me beneath my arms and bear me up once again, towards the filing cabinet.

In the end, it's the pain. When all's said and done, our bodies are selfish creatures, and they control our minds. Forget love. Forget loyalty. Forget hope. Forget the dream. Remember pain.

When I've told them more than I imagined I ever knew. When I've told them about Walter Bracken and about Ursula. When I've told them, yes, about Francis Eveleigh and about my acquaintance and about poor Larry Black at the *Crown and Cushion* and Ernie Svendsen who deserves it

anyway and all the children I used to teach at Lichfield Grammar who I know are grown up by now and culpable as all we British are yet at the same time totally blameless. When I've told them about that time in the twenties when I saw Francis Eveleigh again at the Cottage Spring except he was now really John Arthur, and about the stupid, stupid joke of tomorrow being the fifteenth anniversary of that day. When I've told them everything, I'm suddenly aware of the sticky creak of the chair I'm still tied in, and of the waiting emptiness that seems to flood around me. It's still too hot in here, although I'm shaking with cold. The pipes are humming. And I'm flying through everything, right down into the earth's core and the grinding, meshing heart of history.

"Well…" Reeve-Ellis says eventually. His arms are folded. His legs are stretched out. He's sitting well back from the desk and the mess I've made. "I suppose we had to get there eventually." He glances back at PC K2910. "Did you get most of that?"

PC K2910 nods. His face is paler than ever now; the freckles are like drops of blood.

"Then give me that notebook."

Reeve-Ellis takes it from PC K2910. The way he stuffs it into his pocket, I know he's going to destroy it as soon as they've finished with me.

"Well—you know what to do."

PC K2910 fumbles with the keys. PC T3308's staring at me, a half-smoked cigarette behind his ear. He looks like a family man, and I can see him now with his own chair nearest the telly and the fire in a nice police house in Ealing, and taking his eldest lad to watch Spurs when they're playing at home. I feel sorry for him. I feel sorry for all of them.

The two PCs come around both sides of the desk. They're careful this time as they loosen the ties. They lift me up almost gently. Reeve-Ellis steps back into the corridor as they drag me out.

"Might as well try using your legs, sir. You'll find it'll be easier."

Amazingly, my limbs do still work as we stagger along the corridor in what seems like the opposite direction to that from which we came. But that was an age ago and I can no longer be sure of anything. We find the stairs, and my body is still surprisingly functional as I shuffle up them one at time. We come to doors marked MAINTENANCE ONLY, and PC K2910 fiddles with the bolts, swinging them open into a shock of London night air. I can hear

the murmur of traffic as PC T3308 hooks his hand around my left arm and leads me into the darkness, but the sound is distant, shielded on all sides by brick and glass and concrete. This is one of those ugly shaft-like courtyards that architects design to let light into the centre of large buildings. The distant patch of sky is the same shape and colour as a cooling television screen—there's even one small dot-like star in the middle. I'd always imagined that my life would end in a prettier place. A remote clearing in some wood in the Home counties, the cry of a fox and the smell of leaves and moss…

I glance back. Reeve-Ellis stands in the lighted doorway, hands stuffed into his old cardigan as he leans against the frame. It really is quiet here, although it's probably past midnight in London by now. The whole of this pre-Trafalgar Day, and the celebratory service I was expecting to attend at Westminster Abbey, has gone past me. A faint, bad smell comes up from the central drain that the concrete slopes to.

PC T3308 lets go of me and I sag to my knees, still struggling to protect the precious burden of my hand. He nods to PC K2910 and reaches to release the flap of his holster. The leather creaks slightly. Somewhere, faintly, dimly, deep within the offices, a phone is ringing. His breathing quickens.

"I'm sorry about all this, sir. If I had any say in these things…"

PC K2910 is backing off. Somewhere, the phone is still ringing.

"Wait!" Reeve-Ellis calls across the courtyard.

The two PCs stand as he disappears whilst I hunch between them. The night falls apart, pulses, regathers. From somewhere, I can hear the scream of a whistle, the clattering wheels of a train. Eventually, the phone stops ringing and I stare down at the stains around the drain and breathe the rotten air that it and my own body are making, trying to wish away this moment, this pain. The train whistle screams again. I think of a rocking sleeper carriage. A man's arms around me, his lips against mine. The gorgeous, shameless openness…

I hear the sound of Reeve-Ellis's footsteps. The thin lines of his body re-shape against the bright doorway.

"There's been," he says, "a change of plan…"

Reeve-Ellis drives a Triumph Imperial, a big old car from the pre-Modernist early thirties with rusty wings and a vegetable smell inside given off by the cracked leather seats. It creaks and rattles as he drives, indicating fitfully, jerking from side to side along the night-empty London streets. He's found me an old jacket to put over my shoulders, a doggy-haired tartan blanket to put across my legs. He got PC K2910 and T3308 to clean me up in the toilets of that deserted office before sending them home, although I'm still hardly presentable.

"Who was that phone call from?"

"After what you've been through, old man…" He says, stabbing at the brake as a taxi pushes ahead of us from a junction. "You really don't want to know. Believe me. Just count yourself as bloody lucky…"

I get a glimpse of my face reflected in the windscreen. Red-eyed, shining with a cold sweat in the passing windows of the big shops along Oxford Street. I sway against the car door as he takes a corner too rapidly, the tyres squealing, and pain sweeps over me and London dims.

Reeve-Ellis finally parks his Triumph at the back of a clump of large buildings with flaking Regency windows, then climbs out and opens my door and waits for me to struggle out, clearly irritated by his new role as chauffeur. Viper's nests of piping curl overhead. There are many dustbins. Steel tanks. The parched smell of incinerators.

He leads me through sheet-rubber swing doors into a long corridor where people are rushing, white on white in breezes of laundry starch and Dettol. He barks at a staff nurse. Clearly busy, she swivels to face him, ready to shout back until she sees the gold identity card he's holding. Then I'm found a wheelchair, and borne into the presence of a doctor in what I suppose must be one of the London teaching hospitals. The doctor's manner as he examines me is brisk and irritated. He explores my hand, my arm, without bothering to meet my eyes, and listens to my heart and lungs, then asks if I'm not under treatment already. Reeve-Ellis sits amid the kidney bowls on a corner table. Outside, I can hear the rumble of trolleys, the chatter of nurses, raised, angry voices. Life is, after all, still going on.

"You know how busy we are," the doctor mutters. "Half the drunks in London have celebrated Trafalgar Day a day early…"

"Just get a move on," Reeve-Ellis says, checking his watch. "There's a good man. We need to be out of here. You can save the Hippocratic rubbish

for someone else."

Two extra nurses are summoned to hold me as the doctor unravels a gauze and prepares to set my fingers. One of them clicks her tongue as, gasping and sobbing, I sink to the floor and try to crawl away. "You men!" she chuckles, gathering me up as easily as a heap of laundry. "You're all the same! You've got such a low threshold of pain…" The mole in her cheek is dotted with tiny dark hairs. I do my best to count them in the moment before the bandages whisper and the light on the ceiling pours down and through me.

It's nearly dawn when Reeve-Ellis drives me back through London from the hospital. The street lights are fading and milkmen are leading their wagons from the dairy whilst vans and handcarts head towards Covent Garden, Smithfield and Billingsgate. A few night-time revellers wander home, trailing mists of silk, cigarette smoke, laughter. The brightening sky shines greyish-pink on the Thames as we cross Westminster Bridge and I swallow another of the new thicker tablets I've been given. They taste bitter. Sweet.

At the New Dorchester, the remnants of a fancy dress party are lingering. A Black Knight is clanking around in the remains of his armour whilst Robin Hood is arguing mildly about some aspect of room service with Reception. A body-stockinged Lady Godiva sleeps against Henry VIII's shoulder on the stairs. They all glance at Reeve-Ellis and me without surprise as we move towards the lift. We fit in here, Reeve-Ellis and I. He's come as what he is, and I'm a War veteran—or some symbol of the NHS—with my sling, my gaunt face, my hospital gown. Or perhaps I'm the last guest at *The Masque Of The Red Death.*

Reeve-Ellis punches the button for the lift. Instantly, it slides open.

"The message," he says as the lighted numbers rise, "is that you carry on as before."

"What?"

"Today, old man, you still get to see John Arthur…"

We arrive at my floor. He follows me to my room. The lights come on—far too bright—as he closes the door. The bed has been made and Tony Anderson's half bottle of Bells has been put back in the cabinet, but otherwise nothing has changed since I left here a day ago. The nymphs still cavort across the ceiling. Saint George is at prayer in his forest.

“Get some rest,” Reeve-Ellis advises as he stands in the doorway and I wonder as the world spins if I shouldn’t spit at him, claw at his eyes. “Watch the parades on television. I’ll make sure that someone sees you’re sorted in time…”

“Those people—the photographs you showed me.”

“I don’t know.”

“And what about you?”

“Me?”

“Aren’t you afraid?”

“Of what, old man?”

I gesture wildly about me, nearly falling. “Hell.”

“If there is a hell,” Reeve-Ellis says, reaching to grasp the handle of the door, “you and me, old man—we’d probably hardly notice the difference.” Then he closes the door, leaving me alone once again in my plush room here at the New Dorchester. My wristwatch on the bedside table has stopped ticking, but the electric clock on the wall tells me it’s just after six in the morning. I press the button that makes the balcony curtains open. Dawn light from the Thames ripples and flashes.

I make the effort to slide back the wardrobe doors with my left hand and check my suitcase. The scent of my rooms wafts from inside. Everything has been left so neatly that it’s almost a surprise to find that the pistol is missing. I take another of my new tablets and study the label on the bottle to compare them with my old ones. The handwriting is indecipherable, but how would my body react if I took both together? Six of each, perhaps, or ten? A round dozen of the older, smaller ones—if I could get the screw cap off? Would that be enough to do it? And the little anti-inflammatories, I could take a handful of those, too. The label says you should take them after meals, so they must be bad for your stomach. On the other hand, I really can’t face the idea of any more pain…

I gaze at the stained glass frieze of Saint George. There’s dragon’s blood, I notice now, on his praying gauntleted hands. I’ve been left alone—so perhaps they’re expecting this of me; a bid at suicide. Perhaps that’s why I’ve been given these tablets, and they’re simply watching to make sure that I make a proper job of it. But wouldn’t they have killed me already? Do they want me dead, alive, or stuffed and framed like some grisly hunting trophy when I’m presented to John Arthur? I’m still holding the new bottle.

I throw it across the room with my clumsy left hand. Somehow, raining tablets as it describes a slow arc, it actually hits the stained glass frieze. But it bounces off with a dull clunk, nothing is broken, and the pain caused by the sudden excess of movement falls like a sledgehammer on my right hand.

Weeping, I scuttle across the floor, picking up tablets. Then I ease myself flat onto the bed, which is the only possible way I can lie with this sling. Beyond my windows, a barge sounds its horn and lozenges of light ripple and dance with the nymphs on the ceiling. Big Ben sounds the fall of another hour. I'd press the button on the headboard that makes the doors slide back, were I able to reach it from here. I'd like to smell the Thames on what feels like this last of all days; I'd love to hear it innocently lapping.

I think of clouds over the sheep-dotted Cotswold hills, dissolving into rain, forming springs and streams, then rivers with fairy-tale names like Windrush and Evenlode that swell and meet until, brown and wide, dipped by willow branches, punt-poles and the beaks of wading birds, twirling beer-bottles, dead leaves and blossom, hissing over weirs past the mouths of factories, the Thames finally reaches Oxford. There, as it passes beneath Osney Bridge and Aldgates, it is briefly called the Isis in honour of some forgotten Latin pun before it hurries on. Here in London, it has fostered trade, cholera, prosperity and the muse of a thousand poets. There were bonfires upon it in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, so hard did it freeze…

I see myself in front of a class of students, speaking these words. Francis Eveleigh is there—he's a young boy, no more than ten, and for some reason his arm is in a sling. And Cumbernald, and Christlow, and Reeve-Ellis, and Walter and Ursula Bracken and my acquaintance and the many other faces that have filled my life are there also. I smile down at them as they sit with their scabbed elbows and knees, their grubbily cherubic faces and their whole lives an unspoilt territory before them. Mischief and the looming playtime are forgotten for a while as they listen. For once, my words carry us on together. I'm a *teacher*, I want to tell them through the tears that threaten to engulf me. That's all I've ever been. These are my only moments of greatness. So listen, just listen. All I want to do is to tell you one last tale…

17

MONDAY 21 OCTOBER 1940. TRAFALGAR DAY. John Arthur’s fiftieth birthday, his silver jubilee. A bank holiday. The birthday, also, of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of many reprobate poets the British have taken to their hearts once safely dead.

At nine, and under clearing skies even though the forecasts had remained doubtful, the church bells begin to ring out all across the country. There had been talk of rain coming in from the North Sea, driven down over Lincolnshire and across the Fens towards London on the tail of an ugly trough that had first been monitored two weeks before by the weather ship HMS Steerpike in the ice-floed waters of the Arctic. But that was just a tease. After a glorious summer of hard work and seemingly endless celebrations, no one ever doubted the perfect autumn day this would turn out to be.

By ten o-clock, as I attempt to turn over once more in my half-drugged haze, trestle tables are being laid in village halls or yet more hopefully on dew-damp greens from Mablethorpe to Montgomery, from Treviscoe to Nairn. Balloons are being inflated and jellies turned out onto plates as the same sun that has already warmed the celebrations in Bendigo, Porbandar and the Christmas Islands clears the last of the clouds overhead. Guardsmen are polishing their buckles and blancoing their straps whilst grooms feed and brush their shining mounts. We British are still unsurpassed at doing this sort of thing.

A steward and the hotel nurse are on hand to help me with the tricky process of bathing and dressing. This, I suppose, is what death must be like. The sleeplessness, the loss of care. Floating, white as angels, their sexless faces intermingle, and their words ebb and flow with the sigh of the river and the buzz of the air conditioning. Fluttering wings, brushing me with fingers, they lift and soap and powder and change me. Then I’m swaddled outside on my balcony in the honeyed light and the cool warmth of this Indian summer and brought late breakfast on a tray. The sightseeing barges drift by on the Thames. The people on board point and wave up at me; this small glimpse of age and mortality amid the New Dorchester’s steel and

glass, its winged and muscled statuary. The eggs on my plate have been scrambled into solid little lumps, the bacon has been chopped into pieces that can easily be speared by my clumsily wielded fork. The toast comes in those oily strips that mothers the Empire over call Marmite soldiers. I'm amazed and faintly disgusted to find that I'm ravenously, salivatingly, hungry.

Gathered up like flocks of geese from the vast new airfields in Kent and Sussex as if to make yesterday's air raid seem more real, the fighters and bombers begin to sweep over London in wave after droning wave. The day-trippers pouring in from Guildford and Luton and Stevenage and Chelmsford will be looking up at the skies as they emerge from the cast iron arches of the great London stations. The traffic across Westminster Bridge is heavy as Big Ben chimes midday and the first of the long salute of guns begins to sound in Hyde Park. Their *boom*—not twenty-one today, but fifty—resonates over London, across the great buildings of state and through the fresh river air, biting down into the dull dreadful ache of my right hand and the soft cushioning of the tablets that surround it, my sickness and my hunger. I feel the play of the wind on my face, and I hear the voices of angels; both the ministering ones who take my tray from me, and the grinding roar of the New Dorchester's stone giants that lean across the water, attempting suicide or flight as they support these balconies. And *boom*, *boom*, *boom*… Those guns. It sounds like echoes of the Somme; the rumour of battle.

Then I'm helped back inside where my television set is glowing, giving off a smell of warm bakelite and electricity. My head is supported and my arm is rested in the chair that awaits me before it. I swallow more of the tablets and spread my legs to pee feebly into a surgical jar, feeling the surprising heat of my body bursting through to the glass. Yes, I'm still alive—and the ghosts of Empire are moving on the screen within the big cabinet. From Horse Guards Parade, past Admiralty Arch and along the Mall, comes an endless procession. The camera dances high in an airship's gondola for a moment, and this massive show of might becomes the jerky movement of toys, then we are amid the seats that have been erected at the west corner of what was once St James's Park. Below us, on either side of the great triumphal way that now leads to the landmark ruins of the Old Palace Gardens, and with the sunflashing fat diamond of New Buckingham Palace

canted to the north, lies a vast heaving sea of hats. Those children who aren't piggy-back above all the bowlers, trilbies, cloth caps, pill boxes and Queen Wallis's favoured turbans are marked by cardboard periscopes, flags, balloons.

The parade is endless. Fizzing out at me from the television in shades of dizzy grey, it turns at Palace Gardens and marches back along the far side of the Mall, drums beating, trumpets blaring, hooves clopping, limp flags aloft. The Fourth Infantry. The Gurkhas. The Northamptonshire Youth Branch of the Empire Alliance. Bowler-hatted veterans from the War. Fresh-faced young lads performing bare-chested feats of gymnastics. The Metropolitan Police. The Knights of Saint George. They all cruise past the shuffling ranks of dignitaries like ships beside a gull colony. The Royal Marines *Lilliburlero* meets and clashes with the Boy's Brigade's Rule Britannia. John Snagge's voice flows over it all; not so much a commentary as a litany. I search in vain for Christlow, for Tony Anderson, for PCs T3308 and K2910, for that stationmaster in summery Leicestershire, for my acquaintance. But everyone in the Empire is here, or sharing, like me, through these dizzying wires, the humming valves, the ever-dancing lines. We are all invited.

The King sits with the Queen beside him, fuzzy yet clearly visible in his white uniform, his white gloves. Pointedly, a gap still remains between him and Deputy Prime Minister Arkwright, who's puffing at his pipe. It's typical of the man to delay his entrance, but to do so on this of all days seems more like wilful arrogance than his usual humility. The slant that John Snagge's putting on John Arthur's delay, though, is the usual one of his being busy. There's no sense of concern because nobody doubts that he will soon appear. I can well imagine, in fact, what a delicious luxury it must be for John Arthur to sit in the book-lined calm of his Downing Street study, working quietly through papers with swift strokes of the pen whilst the yearning sea-roar of a whole nation and Empire drifts through the sash windows. A final glance at the softly ticking clock, a dab of the blotter, a pleading peek around the door from a trusty aide as the waiting Rover thrums outside and the chauffeur grinds out his last cigarette. It's hard to imagine a greater moment of power. Where to after this, Francis? Oh, Francis—despite everything, I almost feel as if I can almost understand…

Then he arrives. The cameras, startled, zoom, blur, fill with light. As the sunflash clears and the outlines on the screen begin to darken and gain shape, he's there—John Arthur in a plain grey suit, white shirt and dark narrow tie, stepping carefully past a brace of feather-hatted Colonial Governors and Duchesses, then the EA Inner Circle of Smith, Mosley, Toller, Arkwright, his back slightly hunched like any late-comer at the local Gaumont as he settles into his seat beside the King and exchanges a brief word, smiling, checking his programme. Even John Snagge is silent, and I can't help but feel sorry for the Women's Royal Voluntary Service who are passing the top of the Mall at this point with their bosoms wobbling in their cardigans, and for the Chelsea Pensioners who come after. Even here, a full mile away in this hotel, the air has become electric, crackling and yet silent beneath all this processional noise. Tens of thousands of hats, as if choreographed by some great ballet, have swivelled in just one direction. Every eye, every camera, and with it, the attention of the whole world, shifts. I hear my own throat make a sobbing noise. The word is whispered. *He's here. Here… At last.…* It fills us with the soft thickness of tears and longing.

The latter part of the parade is more military. It's hard not to be impressed by grey-black tanks of such shining bulk that they leave burning trails behind them on the television, and artillery, and more aeroplanes, bombers this time, swooping low; perhaps the same tarpaulin-draped machines I saw at Penrhos Park. The sound of their engines reaches me first overhead, trembling the warm air through my balcony windows, then fading to a buzz only to rattle out once again from the television's loudspeakers. Through everything, even in all the long minutes when he's not on the screen, my thoughts remain fixed on that one distant figure, that pin-dot of a man who can be blocked out by an outstretched thumb, or covered by a fly as it wanders across the television glass. He seems so frail out there, so small. I keep asking how it's possible for one man to change anything. And would I have killed him? I don't know. I don't know. Already, that dream seems as lost and remote as the Summer Isles.

The procession finally ends at half past four with a final massive *boom*, and gouts of cordite and tank exhaust threaded by streamers. Very Lights then begin to crackle over Hyde Park, softening up the skies in preparation for this evening's barrage of fireworks. The sound of it washes

out across all London, fading like the smoke into one single noisy fog. The air in my room is cooler now, and the sky outside my balcony doors is already darkening as members of the New Dorchester's staff return to re-cosset me, their pale voices and fingers seeming to emerge from the screen. I fight them off for a final glimpse as the camera shifts once more towards John Arthur. He's getting up from his seat now, making his way between a blur of other dignitaries, pausing momentarily, raising his hand towards the camera and the crowds to wave before he heads off to make the speech the BBC will broadcast live to the whole Empire and the fearfully listening world. I let out a yelp as my own right hand twists in sympathy.

"Need to get you ready now, sir. Here's the suit, is it…?"

I'm helped to the bathroom. My hair is slicked and combed, my face is washed and shaved, my armpits are dabbed. The process of dressing is more like armouring a knight of old; it would be easier if we had pulleys and winches. But still we get there, these hotel people and I, moving along shifting avenues of pain as the light from the television plays over us. I have my left arm in the sleeve of my suit jacket and the right cradled inside. After few skilled snips and stitches, the thing hangs as if made for someone wearing a sling.

A chauffeur stands in the doorway now. "Time we had you out of here sir," he says, a clipboard resting in the crook of his elbow. Darkness is welling as the television flares, casting shadows across walls and carpets. Saint George glitters colourless as he prays, the forest around him is frosted white as music sways through the air—something triumphal by Coates or Elgar—and the television screen fills with a fluttering union jack. I nod that I'm ready, and cross the floor to leave this room. The air seems to drag, and it feels as if history still awaits me. Then the music from television cuts short and the light begins to change. I turn back towards the screen.

John Arthur sits at his desk in his Downing Street study. His eyes are black pools in the moment before the dancing electrons settle in the camera; his silver hair dazzles like wet sand; his flesh is corpse white. Odd premonitional pounding fills my head before the image subsides and he becomes the person we all think we know.

"As most of you probably know by now," he begins, leaning forward slightly, arms on the desk, the small sheaf papers to which he'll never refer in front of him, "today is a special—indeed almost a *sad*—day for me

personally. As well as celebrating Admiral Nelson's famous victory at Trafalgar with all the majesty our Nation can muster, I must also celebrate my own fiftieth birthday. Those of you who have done so already will probably know what that means, but for the rest, I should say that it's a time for looking back as well as looking forward. To take stock of our progress through this remarkable and difficult century…"

A nostalgic and a personal note, then, to begin with. It must be said, though, that John Arthur doesn't look fifty. He doesn't look any age at all. He looks as though he belongs on the screens, deep inside the television, buzzing in the wires, whispering along the airwaves, and that he could go on forever.

The chauffeur touches my good arm, my good shoulder. *Really think we should be going now…* he whispers, peppermint and nicotine on his breath. I'm still looking back at the television screen as he steers me gently into the corridor, trying like the rest of the world to trap and hold a little of John Arthur's light. But his voice remains with me as we move along the corridor towards the lift. Crackling from speakers hidden in the New Dorchester's ceilings, growing fainter in the lift, then booming loud as we cross the empty main atrium, John Arthur speaks of recent developments.

"…but India must always remain vigilant. Here in Britain and in neighbouring Europe, we must be vigilant also…"

The phrases swarm around me, turbulent and strange. Does he mean we and Europe should be vigilant about each other, or vigilant together? Outside in the dusk, as a solitary commissioner holds the flashing glass doors and salutes us, the car that awaits is long and black, and the grinning radiator is fronted by a Bentley's flying B.

I sink down into soft hide as the New Dorchester slides away. Despite everything, I feel a gathering sense of excitement as, warmly beside me, John Arthur's voice murmurs on the car radio.

"There are signs—indeed, alarming signs—that in Britain itself, this very island, we must prepare for troubles to come. I heard only this morning that Presidents De Gaulle and Von Papen have signed a treaty that draws even closer links between their economies and also those of the Low Countries, and unites their military forces into what is effectively one vast European army…"

The French-and-German-threat has been a favourite theme in the popular press, but now John Arthur is giving it his own approval, and a name: Europe. I stare at my chauffeur's close-cropped neck as we drone across the empty tarmac of Westminster Bridge, wondering; does he hear those guns, the same grinding engine of history that fills my bones even in this cushioned womb? Much though we British relish the threat of war, and the swift victories or international climb-downs that inevitably follow, there is always a strange sense of shifting values when a fresh enemy is declared. And our main ally in this can only be Stalin's Russia, with Spain, perhaps Italy…

I try to think of what this new Europe might look like, scholarly lines of thrust and defence that can be put on a map one day. But the whole idea is ridiculous—it ignores the slaughter that would take place first, and the fact that such a conflict would drag in America and the Colonies, China, expansionist Japan. Even more than the War of 1914–18, it would be a World War.

We drive along Whitehall as the speech ends in a typically softly-spoken and wistful finale. All this talk of war seems like a dream as we pass the great glowering facades of the buildings of state where, tonight, for once, no lights are shining. There are brief glimpses down side roads of the eerily empty London streets before we reach Downing Street itself, and the car murmurs in without pausing as the iron gates slide open. The driver turns off the radio and stops the engine. Then my door opens, and a firm hand grasps mine as I climb onto the pavement. One side of Downing Street faces the huge mock classicism of the Foreign Office. On the other stands a tall but dowdy greybrick terrace of a kind that you wouldn't spare a second glance if this were any other street in England. The old Whip's Office at Number 12 is now the National Headquarters of the Empire Alliance, and the traffic and the tourists are kept back by those iron gates, but little else has changed here with the advent of Modernism. A London constable still stands guard at the polished black door of Number 10, just as he has done since Peel introduced them.

He's number D4528, I see, as I pause on the steps whilst the door is opened. He doesn't even wear a gun. Inside, the air smells disappointingly municipal—a bit like Oxford—of beeswax and floor polish and fried bread and half-smoked cigars; slightly of damp, even. A surprisingly large tiled

entrance-way set with an impressive Adam fireplace leads into an even larger hall formed around a curving staircase. The walls here are hung with the portraits of previous PMs. Historian that I am, I spot Gladstone, Disraeli, the Pitts older and younger, and many others. There's even John Arthur himself, although he looks nearly insignificant rendered in oils. The camera does him far more justice.

There are voices. Other people are wandering. Almost in panic, I look around, and glimpse Father Phelan's grizzled head and one or two of the other nobodies I've come to recognise during my stay at the New Dorchester. I'm back on the tracks of the itinerary that had always been intended for me—*6 o-clock, PM meets and greets*—I'm here, and nothing has changed. It's as if the pistol, this hand, never happened. I'm almost glad, in fact, that the pain's still here to remind me that things could have worked out differently. Swallowing another of the tablets that the hotel steward placed loose in a small inside pocket of my suit, I wander through to an elegant room of wood panels and mirrors, then along a gilded corridor where glowing clouds and cherubs cavort towards double doors that open out into the Downing Street gardens.

Seen from the back, with its tall windows, pillars, its wrought iron and its domes, Number 10 now looks more like what it is, which is a small stately home tucked into a quiet side street in the heart of London. The transformation from that terraced front is so much like all the other shams of Modernist Britain that I have to remind myself that the building has been this way since Walpole refurbished it in the 1730s. No wonder John Arthur is happy here. No wonder no one has ever wanted to leave.

The sky has that grainy darkness that often seems to gather above London. The willows in the garden slump limp and pale grey; the rose bushes are crumpled fists of paper. Paraffin lamps are carried out and placed at intervals, shining on the guests as they move amid the mossy urns and statutes, glinting over the mirror-black waters of the ornamental pool. As they mill and chatter in the hushed tones of visitors to a consecrated building, I tread the gravel path between the lawns leading to the deeper darkness beside the garden's outer wall.

A small stir arises, followed by ugly lightning blasts of flashbulb, before the autumn evening re-asserts itself and a grey-haired man of slightly less than average height moves easily amid his people; one to the next,

shaking hands. From where I now stand, their voices reach me as wordless calls; cries, murmurs, exclamations.

The scent of damp turf and old brick floods over me in this gloomy overshadowed place as the stars prickle above London. My right hand begins to throb, and I swallow more tablets, chewing them first so to get their sour chalky taste, their bitter reality. I'm alone here. There's no one to notice me. John Arthur's shirt looks incredibly white as he moves, smiles, touches; still filled with the moonlit glow that he radiates on television. The lanterns and the few remaining flowers seem to brighten as he passes them, moving further out to greet the shyer members of his congregation. I imagine my last moment of history as I step towards him from these deeper shadows and he smiles with the warmth of recognition that all politicians have. Then the feel and the sound of the gun. *Bang bang.* I can imagine the smell of it too, hanging grey in this grey air, drifting luminous in the lamplight, embroidered with gasps and shouts and screams. Blood flowering blackly within the white of his shirt. His eyes fixed on mine, knowing and unknowing as he falls back. Forever unchanging.

John Arthur seems to glance in my direction as I stand hidden against the dark mass of the ilex tree. But there's still a tropical Bishop for him to joke with. Then Father Phelan who, doubtless pumped up on whisky, assumes that arms-up stance you see in old boxing posters. John Arthur, all laughing reluctance, mimics him for a moment and a flash bulb whitens their faces. The small crowd around them are smiling. Phlegmy Irish laughter—surely a rare sound these days at Number 10—briefly crackles in the air.

Already, discreet KSG minders are shepherding some of the guests back into the house after their brief moment of glory. The garden slowly empties and the voices grow fewer and quieter as damp darkness thickens. Far overhead, a plane is mumbling. I've seen almost all I want to see as the last of the guests troop back in through the lighted square of the doorway and John Arthur, arms behind his back now, white cuffs showing, looking a little tired, prepares to follow them.

Then he turns and glances back. He takes a step towards the darker reaches of the garden. Then another. And I, feeling some impelling force behind me in the night, take a step forward, too. And then again. Towards him, towards John Arthur, hearing the sea-shoosh of my feet on the gravel

as my head begins to buzz. It's almost as if I'm still being pushed forward into this moment by some force of history.

We meet in the middle of the garden, at the very edge of what remains of the light.

"It *is* you, isn't it?" John Arthur shakes his head. His voice, his whole posture, belong to a far younger man. His hands flutter white as the strange roaring fades in my ears. More than ever now, I am walking along pathways of dream. "I'm sorry about that business with your name… You know, I wrote that maiden speech after midnight. I was exhausted, but I thought you deserved a mention. I'm truly sorry I got it wrong."

"Most people just use my surname now. In Oxford, that's the way it's done… No one would call me Griff, even if that still was my name. To everyone, I'm just Brook."

He smiles at that, although a little sadly. Then he glances around the dark garden, as if to check that we're alone. One suited minder stands at the doorway into the house. Another has walked halfway up the path towards us. John Arthur's eyes flicker down to my sling.

"That was done yesterday," I say, my voice more unsteady than I'd intended. "Your people did it to me when they took away the gun."

"No," he shakes his head, his gaze fixing mine so firmly that a tremor runs through me, his irises dancing bright and alive. "It wasn't *my* people, Griff. You were arrested without my authority. You don't have to believe me, but I didn't mean for any of this to happen, Griff. It wasn't any kind of…"

Griff. He searches for a word. *Griff.* A blackbird sings briefly from a bush, but otherwise there is earthy darkness, an implacable sense of silence.

"…Any kind of trap. I heard that you were ill and I wanted to see you. I've always wanted to see you, but now at last seemed like the right time. That was all. No one told me about…" He swallows audibly, running his hand back though his sleek grey hair. It's a fair impression of distress, and I believe John Arthur now as much as I've ever believed him. "No one told me about the gun until word came to me that you'd been arrested yesterday evening. As soon as I heard, I ordered your immediate release."

I study him. What am I supposed to say? There was, after all, the phone that summoned Reeve-Ellis just as PC T3308 prepared to raise his

gun—so something must have happened. Or perhaps it was all just another part of the same game. Or a different one.

"Haven't got long to talk now Griff," John Arthur says, and points towards the house with his thumb. "They'll soon want me back in there."

"I thought you made your own decisions."

He laughs at that. The sound is light, bitter, careless. "Whoever told you that?" Then he shrugs and shoves his hands into the pockets of his suit. It's a typical gesture of his; we've all seen it a million times. "My life isn't my own, Griff. But, look, I've been thinking about you these last few months. I suppose I miss the personal life, the things that were…" He looks away from me. Once again, his face fills with a kind of sadness. We are standing barely a pace apart now, yet I cannot hear him breathing. Neither have we touched; for, despite Father Phelan's foolish intimacy, John Arthur is notoriously wary of physical contact. He gives off a faint chemical smell that comes I suppose from the television make-up he must have recently been wearing. He looks grainy and grey with the great house now glowing behind him. Still less than real.

"In a few minutes I'm going to have to get back in there and talk to that screeching hag—what's her name?"

"Gracie Fields."

"I'll have to sit smiling for half an hour whilst she wishes me good health from all the nation and presents me with a china plaque all the way from Burslem. And after that… After that…" His brow furrows, as if the prospect of the evening requires great intensity of thought. "After that, I'd like for us to talk, have a drink. We could go somewhere, Griff. Just you and I. I could shake off all of this for a while…"

With that, he turns and walks back towards the house. His manner is forgetful as the deepening night air parts to receive him. There are many stars kindled overhead now; the night will be crisp and clear. Shadows that I hadn't noticed before separate from the trees and the ancient walls and move towards him. A cigarette flares as they cluster and quick, deferential voices murmur. One of the shadows moves towards me. Others seem to blur behind him. I almost want to run.

He's dressed in a KSG uniform, is the shadow that approaches me, although I can't properly make out his face. He could be anyone, anything.

We’re all just ciphers here. My head sways dizzily as I’m led back across the soft turf of these Downing Street gardens towards the house.

“It seems, Mr. Brook,” his voice says as the lamps are put out and the warm windows beckon, “that you’re set to be with the PM for the evening…”

I murmur and nod.

I don’t believe anything.

18

JOHN ARTHUR IS SILENT as he drives swiftly along Horse Guards Parade and then on through clear barricaded side streets, past police road blocks and the edges of the crowds that are gathering along the Embankment for the vast fireworks display to come. No one turns to stare. The speeding, blank-windowed official car is commonplace in Modernist Britain.

"You enjoyed the show?"

"The show?" I look over at him.

He shakes his head, the lights forming and re-forming his face. "I mean all of it. These last few days…"

"I was hardly paying much attention."

"Of course." He pushes the car faster. "You were here to kill me…"

Drunk and jolly Tommies squat aside the lions as we pass Trafalgar Square, shouting down to their mates who are pissing or splashing merrily in the fountains. Everywhere, flags are being waved, people are leaning dangerously out from windows, couples are kissing deeply in shop doorways, lads are climbing lampposts. There will be deaths tonight. There will be conceptions.

"Look…" What do I call him? John? Francis? Sir? Mr. Arthur? None of his names belong. "I can't plead with you. I've been through too much already. And I don't mean," I gesture vaguely at the car's window, "just this…"

On through Covent Garden and across the Strand, then past the Inns Of Court. Fleet Street, with the front pages written and typeset—the news on this Trafalgar Day already made—is quiet, but we're drawn to a halt by a knot of traffic around Saint Paul's where there are flags and litter, twisted railings, and a man is vomiting onto the pavement. A taxi draws up beside us as we queue to get into Cheapside. Two women in evening clothes are talking animatedly in the back.

"Tell me this, though, Griff," he says, his fingers clenching and unclenching on the wheel's stitched leather. "Whatever made you think the world would change if there was no John Arthur?"

"Who would replace you?"

He inches the car forward. The back of a bus thrums ahead of us. I SHAN'T BE LONG—MOTHER'S USING SUNLIGHT. "You tell me."

"Jim Toller's too young—nobody trusts him. People like Smith and Mosley are second-rate politicians. They'd be second-rate under any leader. I suppose there was Harrison, but then he was conveniently executed for treason. We've all been laughing at William Arkwright for years…"

"You shouldn't underestimate Bill Arkwright. I've kept him close to me because he's the one person I can least trust. You're wrong about it all, in fact, Griff. The military, the bloody establishment. They all want rid of me. They were happy enough when they thought that they could just buy a few more cars and whores and polish some extra medals. Without John Arthur, though…" He shakes his head. He sounds tired. His voice is toneless—the famous light Yorkshire accent is almost gone. "The point is that there *has* to be a John Arthur. There would be no point, no purpose, in destroying him. He's something that's been given to me—you understand that? I *want* you to understand, Griff. There's a space called John Arthur into which this world has pushed me. I have been given destiny, Griff. Really, there was no choice…"

"You could cast it aside."

This time, his laugh becomes more bitter. "I *have* to carry on. Why do you think I made that speech this evening? Why do you think this country has to fight? They're afraid, Griff. All of them are afraid…"

Outside, as we move on, the traffic has cleared. We are turning away from the bustling swirl of the river. Looking back, I glimpse the great dome Saint Paul's over the rooftops. As celebratory searchlights begin to wheel around it, extinguishing the stars, barring the sky, it seems to glow and rise as if held aloft by clouds. Then the light flares and the vision is gone, and the roads grow narrower, uglier. Soon, we are in Whitechapel; since the days of the Ripper, since my own sad wanderings and the fights and burnings and intimidations of the twenties, and despite all the new overspill developments at Beacontree, little about the East End has ever changed.

"At least you're still honest with me, Griff," he says, looking over for longer than feels comfortable as the big car rushes along these cramped little streets. "So few people are…" He makes a turn and the tyres squeal and slide across the wet cobbles, then rumble to the kerb of a dead end

beside a scrap of wasteground. The engine stops. He jerks on the handbrake.

"Can you manage to walk a while, Griff…?"

Clinging to my dignity, not waiting for him to come and help me, I climb slowly out. It's cold and dark here. The ground is sticky with litter and the air has a faintly seasidey smell of coal smoke and river silt. Even where the houses begin, the dim street lamps are widely-spaced. John Arthur opens the car's rear door and takes a hat from the back seat—an ordinary-looking trilby—then a dark overcoat, which he pulls on, raising the collar. "There," he says, holding out his arms, pantomiming a turn in the middle of this empty road. "Who would recognise me?"

My walk is slow and laboured as we head towards the houses. John Arthur helps me by snaking his arm around my back and hooking it across my shoulders to support some of my weight, and gives me a little lift as we step over a pothole and up onto the loose beginnings of a pavement. In odd, flashing moments, he feels almost like Francis—although I thought I'd forgotten what Francis ever felt like. His breathing and the way he walks is almost the same, and his skin, beneath it all, beneath everything, still smells faintly of burnt lemon.

Something grey that is too low and quick to be a cat darts into an alley that on warmer days would be filled with washing, but there's no one about and the only lights that show from the windows of these terraces are television grey. The morning's drum and fife bands have long gone. The teas have been cleared, the tatters of ribbon and bunting hang limp, the paper union jacks that the children made at school lie torn in the puddles.

Soon, we're drawing close to the sidings, the tracks and the cliff-face brick warehouses of the docks. It's quiet here tonight, but in my head dropped iron clangs, steam rises, sacks of produce from all the Empire slump and pile as the giant cranes turn and nod in God-like approval. And there's that sound again, that dull rumble gathering at the back of my teeth and in the void that waits to fill my skull when my brain finally evaporates. It's in the boom of guns, the rumble of tank tracks, the drone of aircraft engines, the crash and sigh of masonry, the scream of children, the churning of great machines, the grey roar of an angry sea…

"For all those years," I say as John Arthur helps me along the brick-cobbled street and the sky over London suddenly fractures into light. "I

thought you were dead. It destroyed your parents—did you know that? Putting up a headstone years later isn't enough…"

"Don't try to tell *me* what happened, Griff—as if you know more than I do about my life."

I blink stupidly as the fireworks roar and the shadows colour and change, suddenly close to tears.

"I loved you once…"

His face is close to mine. His arm squeezes my waist as he helps me along. "I know that too."

We're drawing close to humanity again. Locals who've wandered out from their homes to gather where there's a view beyond the piers where the Thames glitters and the sky fizzes, churns, explodes. Mothers in slippers with scarves wrapped over their curlers are holding up their youngest for as long as their arms will last. The men have fags behind their ears and the stubble of a day off work peppering their chins. Their collars are off and many are in vests, flabby arms showing tattoos: MUM. IRIS. WEST HAM. They *ohh* and *ahh* as the sky crackles and the colours shine in gutters and ignite the myriad panes of warehouse windows. No one notices John Arthur as he and I slip between them. He's just a slight middle-aged man helping his invalid father.

Beyond, a little away from the crowd where the river can no longer be seen, some tea chests lie heaped beside a wall where a few loose posters, grainy and grey, cling like bats. LONDON, CAPITAL OF EMPIRE. ORIENT LINE. VISIT JAMAICA. I slump down even though the air is sour here with the stink of dog excrement that pervades all such places and the wood is wet. John Arthur sits beside me. In shadow, he risks taking off his hat, and gestures towards the crowd. "They all seem so happy," he says. "A few drinks, a bed, food, some flesh to hold, some bloody fireworks…"

"They worship you."

"Do they? You tell me, Griff. You're the historian. Why would anyone follow John Arthur?"

"Because you offer them certainty." I cradle my arm, one half of me wanting to draw closer to him, the other wishing I was far, far away. "Because you tell them whom to hate and love."

"Is that all they want from him?" He looks at me challengingly then, does this ex-lover of mine who once used to gasp as he emptied himself

into me—does this John Arthur. Something chill and terrible runs down my spine. A shock that's almost the opposite of recognition. Now, powerless as I am, I'm sure that I was right to try to kill him.

"You don't understand what it was like," he says. "You weren't in the War."

"I thought I'd lost a friend."

"We all lost friends—do you think *I* didn't? But it's not enough, is it? After what we went through. I thought it might be enough when I first visited Dublin after the victory. And then again when word came through from Rhodesia." He shakes his head as sulphurous plumes of red smoke drift over London. "You don't know what the War was like, Griff. No one did who wasn't there…"

He's leaning forward now, eyes fixed on nowhere as the flashes of light catch and die over the planes of his face, the silver of his hair, his elbows resting on his knees as he grips the rim of his hat, turning it over.

"It was all so easy when I enlisted," he says. "There were men chatting with each other on the train as that took us down to this big park north of Birmingham. Suddenly we were all the same—bosses and labourers…

"We came just exactly as we were, Griff. Dressed in the clothes we'd arrived in at the station. We thought we'd all be given uniforms…" He chuckles. The fireworks spit and crack. "We were expecting those bloody uniforms for weeks. There were men dressed in their Sunday best doing bayonet practice with broom handles, or the overalls they'd worn at the factory. We slept in tents from the Crimea. But we were proud of what we were, Griff. We didn't care what the rest of the world thought because we knew we were right…" He shakes his head.

"I was a rifleman, Griff. Third best shot in the training battalion when the Lee Enfields finally arrived. I even found that I wasn't bad at boxing. Entered the competitions they organised to keep us busy, and was runner up without even trying. Perhaps that was the trick.

"We went to France in December as part of Kitchener's First Army. The regular soldiers thought we were a joke, called us the greys because our khaki was the wrong shade. It itched like hell when it got wet—the stuff was made for horse blankets—and you could see us coming a mile off. South Staffordshires. C Company. 89th Battalion. I remember hearing the first sound of the big guns. Boom, boom. Even when it's far off, Griff, it's a

bigger, deeper noise than you'd ever imagine. I didn't know if it was theirs or ours, but the sound was somehow reassuring. I was a soldier at last—I was *there*…

"Don't believe any of the bloody rubbish about King and Regiment and Country. We didn't care who we were fighting. It could have been the French or the Hun or the Belgians—we hated them all. We hated them almost as much as we hated the cavalry waiting behind the lines and the staff officers and the pay corps. You fight, Griff, for the bloke who's standing next to you. You put up with all the mud and the lice and the officers and the regimental bullshit for their sake. If you're lucky, perhaps there's someone back at home as well. But there was never anyone like that for me. I'm sorry, Griff—there simply wasn't, and I ended up being grateful for that because I saw what happened to the others. The letters from your girl going on about some new bloke that got shorter and shorter and then stopped coming at all. How could we possibly tell any of you what it was like after that, Griff—you civilians? How could you ever know?"

"It must have been terrible."

"It wasn't terrible. It wasn't terrible at all. I've never laughed more in my life, or felt more wanted, more as if I belonged. The rain. The rats. The mud. It was all like some stupid practical joke. And it was quiet a lot of the time and there were empty fields where the corn had grown wild and you could lie down in the evening and stare up at a perfect sky. Then down to the town, most us of half-drunk already, and the fat white mademoiselles spitting on their fingers and saying *laver vous.* Yes, Griff, I did that too. And I had friends, mates, encounters. There were places—the back of the cookhouses, other odd corners. Nobody cared. Everything was accepted as long as you kept it out of the noses of the officers and did your job. But for me love—sex—whatever you call it, just faded. Perhaps it had never been there…" He stares down, his silvered head bowed as the rockets whoosh and wheel, scrawling out the sky.

"We were sent to the Somme in June 1916. It was supposed to be the big push that would win the War, but we knew that we were just covering a cock-up that the French had made. I remember hearing the guns as we marched along this road behind the flour wagons. And for the first time, after over a year of fighting and hearing shells and being shot at, I felt afraid…

“It’s terrible, you know, Griff. Feeling afraid when you know that fear’s the only logical reaction. Nerves—they’re okay, every soldier gets nerves when something’s about to start. But fear, real fear—what we called funk—it freezes you up. It means you’re no longer working for the man next to you.

“I lay awake that last night. We knew we were going over the top in the morning. Not that they told you, but you could tell from the guns. I couldn’t sleep. Boom, boom, and the stink of the trenches. Boom, boom, boom. That great iron voice. The sergeant came around before dawn with diamonds of felt to sew into the sacking of our helmets so that the rest of the Regiment would know who we were. About twenty of us had to share one needle and thread, and my hands were so useless that I had to get someone else to do mine. I could barely breathe, but they all thought it was just Frannie’s nerves, which was alright, because they all felt nerves. They weren’t afraid. Not the way Frannie Eveleigh was. They didn’t know funk, fear. They were laughing, joking, humming some stupid tune under their breath when the captain came to tell us we were getting a chance to have a go at the Hun and how much it all mattered to the King and Lloyd George and the whole bloody country. I felt sorry for him, too. The snipers and machine gunners always went for the officers first.

“The big guns stopped, and that silence was the worst thing of all. I felt as though I was watching myself. Frozen. I didn’t know if I could go over the top, although I was sure I’d be court martialled and shot if I didn’t. But that wasn’t enough—the threat of some other kind of death a few weeks later.

“Then the guns started again. Boom, boom. The sound seemed to cover us like a blanket and then this vast final massive earth-shaking *boom* that was a land mine the sappers had planted under the German trenches. Then we were moved up to the front line. Thousands, thousands of us. And there was silence, just men breathing and the shuffle of our feet on the duckboards and the creak and jingle of our packs. And we stared at the last sandbags ahead of us and the ladders that had been laid against them. And we waited. It was too late for joking now. It was too late for anything. The officers checked their watches and someone blew a whistle about a mile off. Then another whistle blew closer and you could hear the sound coming towards you like a train.

“Men started to climb out of the trenches—I watched them go ahead of me. Some were yelling the way you were supposed to and some went quietly and some prayed. A lot of them just fell back and I thought they were being clumsy until I realised they’d been shot already. Guns were clattering and you could tell from the sound that they weren’t ours. The Germans were firing straight back at us as soon as we stuck our bloody heads over the top. And I just stood there. It was the worst moment of my life but I knew I couldn’t go back, so I started to climb up out of that trench. I went over into the morning with the sky suddenly big above me. My mates were already running around the pool of a big shell hole far ahead—I could just catch their voices on the wind. And Boom boom. Rat-a-tat-tat as they were cut down one by one. I was just wandering in a nightmare. I wasn’t running. I wasn’t even sure if my feet were moving…

“I don’t know when I got hit, Griff—or how long it took. It just felt as if something had pushed against me and there was this heat across my side as I slid down into this long hollow. The mud came up around my waist and I knew then that I was hit because I could see these trails of blood fanning out like roots through the algae. But I knew it wasn’t that bad. I could touch myself there and it barely hurt. I should have gone on, Griff. I should have climbed out of that ditch and gone on. But I didn’t. I just crouched there the whole day. I was shivering, weeping. Boom, boom—I could hear the shells whistling over. The bullets rattling. But I was alone with my fear, Griff. Quite alone.

“Darkness came and the flares went up and the guns still boomed and crackled, although you knew that the German snipers would aim high most of the time at night to give the rescue parties a chance. I tried to get up then, but the sides of the ditch were slippery and my left side seemed to have frozen. Then I heard voices close by and I shouted back. Men with stretchers found me and hauled me out. I was muddy and blood-sodden and I looked enough of a mess to be convincing as I was carried back to the field dressing station.

“Everything there smelled of shit and mud and iodine and dying men. The soldier on the stretcher beside me kept trying to talk, but even when I managed to turn myself over to see more of him, I couldn’t work out what he was saying. The words he was making seemed to begin with a K and then an M, but the sound was more like something caught in his throat. His

uniform was dry—there was hardly any blood on it. He didn't even seem to be wounded. Then I moved myself up some more until I could see his other side, and that the right side of his skull had been smashed away like the top of an egg. His right eyeball was just lying there it in its socket like some anatomical drawing, his jaw was shattered and his tongue was embedded with bits of his teeth. It didn't make any sense for him to be alive at all. I suppose that was why they'd just left him here—because they expected him to die.

"The two eyes, the good one and the bad, were staring up at me. I felt his hand flapping at mine, and I looked down and saw that he was trying to point towards a pistol he had strapped to his belt. I understood then what he'd been trying to say, which was Kill Me. Kill Me. It was the kind of favour you'd do for any mate at a time like that—and one that you'd hope someone else would have the guts to do for you. No one would have noticed a single pistol shot, not here in all this mess where the guns were still loud. But I knew that I couldn't do it.

"I just lay back and stared up at the lantern as this soldier beside me gagged and moaned, knowing that this was funk, this was fear, that I was worthless as a soldier. I was feverish by the time I was tagged and looked at inside the treatment tent. I was given some water and a jab of morphine and quinine and carried across the fields to a big river barge just as dawn was coming. It was supposed to provide an easier journey for the casualties to the back-of-the-line hospital, but it was slow, and there were no windows down inside the hold. You could still smell the coal that they'd cleared out of the barge beneath all the other stench, and you could hear the water laughing around the sides as we pulled away from the jetty.

"A few men were crying and moaning. A lot were comatose or simply asleep. But we all knew that we were travelling somewhere—those of us who knew anything. Back to life, I suppose. Or death. The man with the half-blown off head was on the pallet nearest to me, and for a while he was quiet and I thought he'd given up the clicking and moaning and had perhaps died at last, but then his whole body gave a spasm and he started it all up again. It was terrible this time. He wasn't even trying to speak. His limbs were jerking and this noise he was making just went on and on. It was a sound out of hell.

“It was too late, by now, to use his gun. But I managed to undo the straps of my pallet and stand up though my head was swimming. He seemed to quieten for a moment then, and look back up at me with his good eye. I took strength from that. In fact, it seemed as if was his strength that enabled me to take the blanket from by his feet and ball it up and push it down hard over his face and hold it there. Of course, he began to fight and buck after a while—it’s what happens when you’re dying, you can’t help it. And it takes longer than you’d imagine to kill a man even when he’s wounded. But eventually he stopped struggling. I was shivering and in tears as I finally lifted the blanket from him. And I was glad that I still had this one soldierly act left in me, even if I’d left it much too late. I knew that he’d died a hero’s death, this man. This soldier. This nameless friend…

“The boat was rocking and my fever was surging back into me again. Perhaps it was that or the drugs I’d been given which made me do what I did. I don’t know. I remember thinking that he had black hair like mine, that he had blue eyes, and what would have been a square jaw before the bullet wrecked it. A thinner kind of face. I felt for the waxed envelope that they’d tied to his tunic at the dressing station. His name was John Arthur, and he was a private—a rifleman like me—in the Staffordshires, although from a different battalion. It struck me that John Arthur was a good name for a soldier, a good name for a man. I’d always hated being Francis Eveleigh—it said everything about the pretensions of my parents and nothing at all about me. I suppose I thought I might be able to lose the fear and the funk if I had a name like that, although at the time as I undid my own envelope and tied it to him and felt for his pay book and swapped it with mine and somehow even lifted his identity tags over his head, I really didn’t know what I was thinking. It was all done for that moment, in the foul air of that barge with the water laughing beside me, just to see how it felt to become him. And straight away, you know, as I lay down again on my pallet and the fever began to take a bigger hold, I felt better…

“When I woke up in the room of a chateau that had been requisitioned as a hospital, the nurses who walked by and tucked at my sheets and cleaned me up called me John. And that seemed right. It was the most natural thing in the world to be John…”

John Arthur is silent for a moment as the sky above London foams with light and the fireworks display reaches its climax, glinting on the

bricks, pushing at us like a wind, catching emerald and ruby pinpoints in his eyes and the wetness of his lower lip. The firecrackers are going *boom boom boom.*

"It's not that unusual," I say, "for people to undergo some sort of change if they've been near to death."

"But you have to see it from inside, Griff. I *was* different. I had *changed.* Francis Eveleigh really did die that day in the Somme."

"Didn't anyone ever suspect?"

"The rest of my platoon had been wiped out. So had John Arthur's. And I caught pneumonia, you see, Griff, so I was shipped back to England and a sanatorium. By the time I was finally ready for active service six months later, I could have been anyone for all the difference it made. John Arthur never got any letters, and I found out from his file that he had no wife, no loved ones, no family. No one who cared about him apart from me.

"So I went back to the front as S4538 Rifleman Arthur, D Company 7th Service Battalion, The Rifle Brigade, and I knew from the first time I heard the guns that this time it would be better, this time I wouldn't feel any fear. I was even made corporal, which was something Francis Eveleigh would never have become. I won the George Cross… But that's common knowledge, isn't it?"

"What was it like when the War ended?"

"It was the end of everything. People in the streets back in England looked away from you. They blamed us soldiers for losing the War. I don't know. I suppose that in our hearts we felt the same. I used to blame myself for defiling the name of this man, this John Arthur. He deserved more than I'd been able to give him. This empty country, this lost War.

"I went up to Raughton, which was John Arthur's last address before enlisting. I found out that the Yorkshire accent I'd copied from one of the cooks was all wrong, but that didn't matter. We were like ghosts. Nobody seemed to belong anywhere then. The place was just a pit village and the address was a cheap boarding house. I stayed there for a few weeks, finding out a bit more about this person—this John Arthur. One or two people told me they remembered him, but I never really knew if they did. He'd been older than me, but seemed to have made little impression on the world, almost as if he'd been waiting for the War to start. His father had been an itinerant who'd started out in the West Country and had died in a mining

accident. One day I went across to the foundry in the next valley in search of work…

"The place was just like everywhere else, and virtually derelict now that the War orders had gone. But the woman in the office who looked down at my name said she remembered me. There was no work going, but she offered to put me up for a while, and I accepted. I didn't have the money to pay for the boarding house much longer anyway."

"That was Mrs. Framley?"

"Enid Framley. She used to put lodgers up in the spare bedroom, and John Arthur had stayed with her for a few weeks before he enlisted. From the first moment she saw me, she just accepted me as him. She said John and her son Billy had become friends. Of course, Billy had enlisted too, and was killed at Ypres. So I stayed at Enid Framley's and she fed me up and helped me find the occasional bit of work, and around the fire in the evenings we'd talk about how it had once been, those golden times before the War with me and her son Billy. She liked me to call her Auntie. I really do think she believed the stories that we made up on those evenings together, me and Billy out cycling the hills, or fishing on summer evenings at the millpond.

"But I knew I had to do something more with this new life John Arthur had given me. Do you understand that, Griff? Living in England then was a nightmare and all I had was this man's name. So I jumped on a cattle truck, took the train down to London. I'd never been there before, but thousands of men like me had found their way here because there was nowhere else to go. Many of them ended up starving. It was cold that winter and there was the flu epidemic. Each morning under the bridges and in the shop fronts, they'd be a few bodies extra that didn't wake up. And the men in suits and the women in hats who'd never done anything but complain about the rationing just wrinkled their noses and stepped over them. I was lucky. I'd boxed in the army as Francis and there were always people prepared to pay to watch men hit each other. Queers like you, Griff, used to gasp and hold their hands over their faces as if they couldn't bear to watch. And the fat cats and the Jews. Women wearing stoles who'd sit near the ring and then complain if they got flecks of blood on them. And the bright young things. And the colonels who were back from the War without a scratch, jingling with medals and a big pension. And the stupid socialists who wanted to

rescue us all and turn us into smock-coated peasants. This country was in a sick mess in the twenties, Griff. It was a ghost country, it had lost itself.

"But I still remembered I was John Arthur. And I began to meet people who understood that there was nothing left in all the lies that had once kept this country afloat, people who knew that we would have to fight again if anything was ever going to change. The War was still going on, Griff. We soldiers had brought it back with us, just the way you civvies had feared. We still carried it in us—boom, boom, the sound of those guns—and the battle lines were drawn across the country for anyone who cared to notice. And the thing was, I found that if I spoke up and said what I thought, people would listen. If I shouted, they would become silent. If I raised my hand and pointed, they would go the way that I sent them. You saw what it was like—Griff, that night fifteen years ago. You saw how easy it is to *be* John Arthur. He was always waiting there. Always. This figure. Even now, he's leading me on…"

John Arthur shakes his head. The big display is reaching its climax, and the stars have been extinguished by vast man-made clouds that drift amid green and red forests of splintered light. Even here, what must be two miles off, there's a sweet-sour reek of gunpowder as the flares blossom overhead. He puts his trilby hat on, straightens it, checks that his coat collar is still up and offers me his hand again. "Come on, Griff, I'll buy you that drink. It's not far…"

I let him help me up, and as he does so, an elderly woman in a hairnet and a house coat glances back across the road from the watching crowd. Her hand goes up to her mouth for a moment, childlike in wonder. Could it really be *Him* over there? But no, no… It couldn't be, could it? Relieved, she looks towards the crackling sky again.

John Arthur and I shuffle beside the docks and turn down a different side road where a dog is barking inside a house, terrified by the blaze and racket. He breathes easily beside me, helping me along as I wonder what I should say, what horrors I could tell him that he doesn't already know, what questions should I ask. But it's like all those letters that I never wrote to him, and the words I used to feel fading from my lips as I awoke. It's like sitting out with the Cumbernalds in the green darkness of Penrhos Park and saying yes, yes, I once knew John Arthur. It's like all the promises of love that, even in that brief, glorious time when Francis and I were alone in our

turf-roofed cottage by the shore, were never given. It's like my unwritten book. It's like my whole life.

The sky is on fire now. The individual crackles and pocks and explosions have become one vast single roar. The houses look flash-lit, pushed back into skeletons of their real selves. I stumble as the tablets fade from my blood and renewed pain shoots through me. Our two linked shadows leap, burned and frozen ahead into the pavement, and it seems that we're at the lip of a vast wave that will soon break through everything, dissolving, destroying. Then, with one last final bellow, the display ends and we move on through the East End, the ordinary East End of London in this night of the 21st of October 1940 beneath a bruised sky, in shocked, blotchy darkness.

A public house juts at the triangular meeting of the two streets facing towards the Mudchute and the Isle of Dogs. It's a storey higher than the terraces that join it, but of the same grim make and age. The faded paint on the brickwork reads FULLERS ALES. The sign hanging below is unilluminated, painted in darker colours. If I didn't know this place already, I probably wouldn't be able to make out the words COTTAGE SPRING.

John Arthur lifts the latch and holds the door for me, and the room inside is smaller than the place I remember stumbling into after my violent tryst on that scrap of wasteground exactly fifteen years ago. But I recognise the shape of the counter that John Arthur had leapt onto, and the pattern of the mirror, now cracked, that lies behind it. I recognise the frosted windows engraved FINE BEER AND ALES; there, even, is the fat pillar in the corner that I hid behind. This is still the Cottage Spring. It's simply my memory that's been twisted.

There's a moment of bizarre normality as John Arthur takes off his hat, lowers his coat collar, walks up to the bar, rests his elbow, and turns to ask me what I'd like to drink. The barman is polishing a glass, two cloth-capped men are playing darts in a smoggy corner, a drunk is lounging asleep on a bench, whilst three underage lads sit nursing their pints, and an old man stares at his evening glass of stout. They're some of the few who couldn't be bothered to see tonight's fireworks, or even watch them at home on telly, and it's amusing to observe their reactions as they realise who's just come in. There's puzzlement, doubt—like that old woman by the docks in her

house coat—followed by that standard British reluctance to acknowledge the unusual: and the desire to hold back, not to make a fuss.

"I'll buy everyone their next round," John Arthur says, looking around at them and speaking with that soft Yorkshire accent as the air drops into awe-struck silence: the very image of himself. "There aren't *that* many of you here. I think I can afford it… What'll it be?"

Suddenly, they're all clustered around him, breathless and eager like children at a fete when Father Christmas finally arrives. Believing, not believing, wanting to get close, yet still too amazed to touch. And needing, needing. John Arthur signs beer mats with a stubby pencil used to keep the score at cribbage, he laughs and shares a joke. He's really John Arthur now, and these are his people. Even the ones who'd never ever have voted for him can't help but want to share the dream when it's this close. The old man downs the rest of his stout, spilling most of it down his shirt, and quavers that he'd like another. The lads ask for halves of ginger beer, which John Arthur laughingly changes to the pints of Fullers' that they were on before. The drunk remains asleep on the bench in the corner; what a joke the world will have on *him* in the morning…

Outside, word of who's here must have got out; there are children's and women's voices, and the shadows of raised hands and heads shift across the long frosted windows. Pleading fingers squeal over the panes. And I'm just standing here, tired and in pain. Drained of hope. Drained of anger. I shuffle closer to that pillar at the end of the bar, in need once more of its reassuring anonymity. If I could get behind it, it's not far to the door, and even on a night such as this there must be buses and taxis that would take me back to central London; I could escape. John Arthur's forgotten about me anyway. *These* are his people. *This* is where he belongs. I'm just a name from the past that he couldn't remember well enough to get right when he made his first speech to the Parliament that he later dissolved. A phone begins to ring at the back of the pub, seemingly unanswered. Somewhere, a car engine is racing.

Perhaps he's right. Perhaps there had to be a John Arthur, and I was wasting my time imagining that I could ever change anything. Perhaps if that bullet had bit closer and Francis Eveleigh really had bled out his life at the Somme, some other solider would have risen to stand feared and adored

in this East End pub, and a fool like me might be too confused and afraid to love or hate him.

The voices of the men who stand around John Arthur are easier now. Their postures have grown more relaxed. Yes, they realise, he really is just as everyone says he is; an ordinary bloke you could share a drink with. This will be a story they'll tell to their grandchildren in the long days ahead when the squares of striped lawn turn ever greener and the roads entwine and the suburbs marry in playgrounds and clean neat streets where everything ugly and unwanted has been destroyed.

John Arthur looks over from the men clustered around him as the roar of an approaching car fills the street. He seems to notice me now almost as he did all those years ago when I stood amid those angry men. It's as if nothing has ever changed. But this time, somehow, his smile is more genuine, and as he walks over with his arms a little apart, saying, "Griff, what *am* I doing, I haven't even got you that drink…?" I can't help but smile back.

There comes a sharp sound of banging, and the thought passes, too quickly to be fully-formed, that the fireworks have resumed, or that some of the lads outside are tossing firecrackers. Then, one by one, the frosted windows of the Cottage Spring begin to fall in. They burst into shining veils, and splinters of wood fly out and the room explodes in a reflecting spray of shattered bottles and collapsing mirrors. The tide sweeps left to right towards me, tearing the world apart. The men gathered at the bar spin around, are jerked, thrown back, lifted. The glass is like a great watery tide, rolling and rising, incredibly immense. John Arthur pirouettes as the last window explodes. His hands spin out and the shining air flowers silver and red around him, then the rain of glass sweeps on and the pillar I'm beside splatters and streams. Then everything stops and there's sudden, terrible silence, filling slowly with a weeping haze of dust, the reek of spilled beer and whisky, the musical tinkling of the last splinters of glass.

After that, as I look down at this shattered place and these broken dolls lying on the crimsoned linoleum, there comes a sudden crash as the last of the big mirrors falls, and faint, at the very edge of everything, too frail as yet to be really believed, are the sounds of crying, fumbling, moaning, weeping. Then the roar, once again, of that car. Gears smash as it turns, and I wait for more bullets as the agitated air swirls, but instead something large

and metallic flies through the gaping windows. A thick, round-cornered box with a single wire protruding, it hits an upended table with a crack and skids hissing through the wet sparkling wreckage to settle beside Francis’s body.

The car pulls away with a screech of tyres before everything breaks into darkness.

19

EVERY MORNING NOW, I awake not knowing who or where I am; filled with a vague sense of horror and helplessness. I do not even know if I am human, or have any real identity of my own. This, I decide, is how a ghost must feel—what it must be like to haunt or be haunted. But a ghost wouldn't have these twisted limbs. A ghost wouldn't taste soil in its mouth. A ghost wouldn't have this pain.

For a moment then, I am under the rubble again and Francis is beside me. His hand is in mine, and flutters like an insect in the moment that he dies. My life seems to float out in both directions from that point. It's like unwrapping a complex present; tearing away at silvery ribbons of the future and the past, although I know that it's all just some trick—a party game—and that I will be left clutching nothing but tangled paper, empty air.

I ungum my eyes and look out at the world, accepting the strange fact of my continued existence. But it remains a slow process even though this beamed ceiling is familiar to me; fraught with a sense of aftermath, a feeling that another dreadful discovery still lurks amid the gaudy wrapping of my life. I am Brook, yes, I am Geoffrey Brook. I am a lecturer, a teacher—in fact, a true Professor of History now. And Oxford, yes, Oxford. I live in these college rooms, just as I have done for many years. Once, as a preference, I used to love men. Now I seem to love no one, although I sense from the warmth of this bed and the play of firelight over this ceiling that I am encased in cottony layers of help, goodwill, money. By twists and turns that my mind cannot yet fully encompass, I have been close to death. I'm still close to it now. It hangs there with the scent of applewood smoke and old stone and Mansion House floor polish and cut flowers; it whispers to me in the thinning darkness. That, I suppose, is the final sour message within this package that I have been unwrapping.

I feel for my glass, my tablets, which lie a long way beyond the Chinese pheasants cavorting on my eiderdown. That journey accomplished, much water spilt and a few white pellets of bliss lost beneath the counterpane, I lie and wait for something else to happen. I sense that it is early, still dark outside my window, although a strange light seems to wash

up from the quad and there is a chill to the air beyond the crackling heat of my fire. A clock ticks somewhere, and a beam creaks in sympathetic rhythm. Somewhere across the rooftops and towers, a bell, distant yet clear, begins to chime the hours. The sound is sharp, bright as freshly cast metal as I try to count each stroke before time gets lost in the bubbling maze of my breath and my heartbeat, the welling memories, the ebb and flow of pain. When silence and equilibrium return, I shuffle inch by inch across the constricting pull of the sheets until my feet slide off the edge of the bed and the top of my body, in compensation, is forced to rise. I am old, I think. I am old. Perhaps that is the last shock I have been waiting for.

Bunioned, barefoot, trying not to exhaust myself by coughing or retching as I cradle my stiffened and arthritic right hand, I stumble through the cavorting firelight towards my window. Its cold reaches out to me, dribbling fingers of condensation as I wipe the mullions with the sleeve of my nightshirt to gaze at the strange whiteness that lies framed and glowing. It has snowed again in the night. Of course. This is Oxford and it has snowed again in the night. More paths to be cleared. More slush in the alleys. Gargoyles with icicles dangling like dewdrops from their fingers and noses… I have to close my eyes, then, as a twinge of pain from my right hand and the rawness in my throat sets off another ugly memory.

I remember everything now. I am here. I am alive. This is the last day of the year of 1940. John Arthur is dead.

I’m still leaning there, still staring from my college window in a drugged half-doze, when the breakfast trolley rumbles towards my door. The knock sounds hesitant, mistimed, yet still I’m somehow expecting Christlow as the handle turns and the chill outer air touches my skin. But it’s Allenby. Of course. It’s Allenby.

“Good morning, Professor. Terrible lot of snow in the night as you’ve doubtless seen. Got a nice fire going for you earlier whilst you were still asleep. You’d like to eat at the little table, perhaps, seeing as you’re up?”

Allenby hovers, tray in his hand, steam rising in veils from the sausages and grilled tomatoes, diamonds of fat glinting on the fried bread. He’s young and good-looking, is Allenby. He says all the right things, and his bacon isn’t greasy like Christlow’s; he doesn’t even wear an EA badge.

But he still seems like a barely competent actor, forever trying and failing to find the essential meaning of his role.

I open my mouth to speak, and ruminate for a while on the phlegm that fills it. “On the table,” my voice squeaks, “would be fine…”

Allenby slips my padded silk dressing gown from the hook near the fire where it’s been warming. His breath is cool on my neck as he helps me into it; like the air from that doorway, like the sense of the snow. He bends down to sheathe my feet in lambskin slippers, and he ties my sash at the front. For a moment, I’m five years old again; I’m half expecting him to produce a handkerchief and tell me to spit so he can rub the grime from my face. More than ever, I miss Christlow. And my mother. There are so many people to miss.

“You’ve got that appointment, by the way.”

“Appointment?”

“Twelve o-clock at the George Hotel. Miss Flood is coming up from your publishers in London.”

Allenby scrapes back my chair and steers me down. He flutters a napkin, tucks it beneath my chin, then begins to cut up my food. The bloodied eye of the tomato stares at me. He pats my back gently as I begin to cough, pours out the tea and lifts it to my lips—sweet, milky, barely warm—for me to swallow.

“No hurry, Professor,” he says. But he hovers over me anyway, and makes sure that I eat it all up, just as P. Wiseman has instructed him to do. Afterwards, as he dabs at my chin and whisks the tray away, I picture him with one of those glass jars, holding my cock with snowy fingers as he slips it into the aperture; massaging it, even, to erectness. For Allenby, nothing would be too much trouble. Then he lays the morning’s papers out before me. The *New Cross.* The *Daily Sketch.* The *Express.* The *Oxford Chronicle.* The *Times.* Sheet upon warm rustling sheet that smell so crisply of ink and freshly-felled wood that I wonder if he irons them for me, the way butlers do in country houses.

My vision fills and blurs with newsprint. All those words, all that history in the making. I’m tempted to ask Allenby to take the damn things away, but I know that that would seem ungrateful. And there’s something—I remember now—something that still piques my interest, although as yet I

can’t quite recall what. But, after all, as I have to keep reminding myself, I’m still here. I’m still alive. So there must be something…

I reach out towards the table, using my right hand like a scoop to push the *Times* into the better grip of my left. Allenby watches, good servant that he is, as I struggle to unfold it, knowing that he mustn’t always help his feeble master. The *Times’s* front page seems odd now that they’ve dropped the columns of classifieds. This headline, in fact, looks even bigger than usual.

PM ANNOUNCES IMMEDIATE INQUIRY INTO SCANDAL OF JEWISH HOMELAND. RAF AIRLIFTS AID. The photograph beneath shows a group of people huddled outside a rough hut. They are skeleton-thin, clothed in rags. The image belongs outside history—outside time—but I still raise it closer to my eyes, so close that the faces become smudged outlines, then collections of printed dots. The hope remains that I might recognise…

My college Rover slides through the slush along High, Catte and Broad. The air is blue with frost, the cyclists are tentative, and the Radcliffe and the Sheldonian look like iced Christmas cakes. We park at the corner of George Street and the Cornmarket, where my driver helps me out onto the oystered ice of the pavement, and then through the entrance-way and up the brass-rodded staircase.

Miss Flood is already perched on a stool in the Ivy Restaurant’s outer bar. The colours that the snow and the cold have bleached out of Oxford all seem to have fled into these rooms. The ceilings are pink, the walls lean with gilded mirrors, there are flowers at every table. As is often the case now, rumour of my arrival has spread before me, and I must wait and smile and raise a trembling hand in acknowledgement as the main dining room erupts into applause. But the moment isn’t over-played; British through-and-through, and mostly upper-middle class, the other lunchtime diners soon settle back to their meals and their conversations as I shuffle with Miss Flood towards the best table by the window where the head waiter is on hand to serve us.

I settle down. Miss Flood settles opposite me. Her black hair is close-cropped, high at the forehead, framing her pale, red-lipped face like a television screen. Her bracelets slide and jangle as she sips her wine and her fingers are restless as she picks at a bread roll, missing the chains of

cigarettes that, since I succumbed to a coughing fit at one of our early meetings, she refrains from smoking in my presence.

"I was speaking to Publicity only yesterday, Geoffrey," she tells me. "And you're definitely the flagship of our spring list." Her legs slide as she crosses them.

"That's good to know…" I wheeze. "I received your letter with the, er, galleys only the day before yesterday."

"Try not to think of them as *galleys* or *proofs*, Geoffrey. Think of them as…" Miss Flood waves her hand, clutching an imaginary cigarette. "Complimentary reading material." She smiles. "We'll do all the donkey work. The re-checking. The few minor corrections. In fact, it's mostly already done. We're well on schedule to get it to the printers by late January. So you really needn't worry…"

I nod. What she means is that she wants to keep me well away from the tricky business of correcting my own scholarly inaccuracies, my pointless circumlocutions, my ungrammatical turns of phrase.

The first course arrives. I prod at the shrimps, bits of lettuce and herb without eating whilst Miss Flood, thin as she is, does the same. Then she delves into her briefcase and shows me a glossy mock-up of the dustjacket. The first print run is 30,000, with the presses ready to roll with another 30,000 after that. They're mass market, these people, and have already generated far more interest in these warmed-over goods than the Oxford University Press could ever have done. Amazingly, they've stuck with my suggestion for the cover of an un-specific but undoubtedly English landscape of fields, woods, farmhouses and distant church towers, with an island-dotted sea on the horizon. And I, Geoffrey Brook, seated in the back-flap photo in my college rooms—you can just make out the Stubbs and Tort on my bookshelves behind me—seem almost healthy, suitably scholarly. You'll never know from the look of this book that Miss Flood's other major authors write do-it-yourselfs and who-dunnits. I really can't complain.

"As to the title," she says, tapping the celluloid with a scarlet fingernail, "you'll see that we've stuck with our original suggestion…" She waits a moment, gauging my reaction.

FIGURES OF HISTORY
GEOFFREY BROOK

"…That, er, *other* suggestion that you made. Good though it was, I'm afraid that it didn't quite click with our marketing people. *Fingers of History* was too close, if you see what I mean. There are a lot of people out there who still remember your work for the *Daily Sketch,* and who'd love to have a hardback copy of your best articles…"

"This isn't the book I wanted, you know. That, I burnt. This is just…" But I'm lost for words.

"What? Oh, and we've finally cleared up the copyright business. Being who you are, Geoffrey, I really didn't think that they'd want to resist."

I gather from the look of the bottle, my empty glass, the rosy warmth that has settled over my skin, that I've been drinking the wine. My mouth now tastes of metal—brass, pewter, or some other tarnished alloy—rather than soil.

"We'll need to hurry you," Miss Flood says more quietly, slipping in the words when she imagines that I'm not really conscious as I gaze out of the window at the snow-softened spires, domes, towers of this city. Balliol, All Souls, Queens… The litany of my dreams. "If we're going to squeeze in that new extra chapter you were talking about."

"I've decided," I squeak, "what I want to write about."

"Oh? That's… Good." Miss Flood nods semi-eagerly, balancing her jaw in her hand.

"It fits in with research I was doing into the history of the Jews." Jews… My voice sounds even lighter than ever as I end the sentence, but I'm sure her blue irises contract at the mention of the word, and that the restaurant conversations fade into shocked hush all around me. "What with all the fuss there's been in the papers these last few days about their mis-treatment in the Highlands…" Something sticks and crunches in my throat. "I was thinking…" I cover my mouth with a handkerchief and cough lightly, carefully, to clear it. "Thinking that the time is right to remind people…"

"Geoffrey, that sounds *fascinating*." Pause. "Although everyone's hungry to hear more about your links with John Arthur."

"Of course."

"Not that I want to steer you in any particular direction."

"There'd be no problem with censorship, then, if I was to write about the mistreatment of the Jews?"

Miss Flood smiles at me. “What problem could there be, when it’s on the front pages of the newspapers?”

“You tell me.”

“In my experience, Geoffrey, the only barrier you’re likely to come up against is what people want to know about. All the rest of it, the D Notices, the Truth Guidelines, our in-house Censorship Liaison Office, it’s all…” Her bracelets jangle again as she waves her fingers to indicate something far off, barely tangible, quite beyond all the realms of normal experience.

“And what about the writers who’ve been pulped, burned, disappeared? You must have had some on your lists.”

Miss Flood’s nails dance amid the cutlery, bright as blood. “Books always get pulped and burned, I’m afraid, Geoffrey. It’s what happens when they don’t sell. But I’m sure we won’t have that problem with *Figures of History*.”

My eyes are watering. My nose is starting to run. I fumble to find a clean corner of my handkerchief as I begin to cough. The sense of all Oxford—the chime of bells and the clatter of lunchtime cutlery, the waitresses’ whispering and the taste of the wine and the smell of the cooking and clangour in the kitchens and whispers in ancient corridors and the scent of old stone and fresh snow—fractures around me.

Geoffrey Brook was born in Staffordshire, Lichfield, in 1875. He has devoted most of his life to teaching history, firstly in and around the City of his birth, where he influenced the young John Arthur, and later in his life at one of the most distinguished and ancient Oxford colleges…

Running my pen through the word *ancient,* scratching a question mark over *distinguished*, I close the file of publicity material as my college Rover hisses slowly along High. Already, it’s getting dark and the lights in the shop windows are glowing. Prices have gone up a lot recently—taxes, as well—and you’d think that people would have had enough of shopping after the frenzied weeks before Christmas. But there they all are, wading through the slush and the grubby snowdrifts and the dangerous ice with their bags and their bargains and their weary children. The windows offer BIGGEST EVER SALE and HUGE POST-XMAS DISCOUNTS, even though tinsel still sags at the windows and it won’t be twelfth night until Sunday.

My college tower looms and the chill air bites as I dismiss my driver and wade unaided across the snowy quad through clouds of dizziness and my own breath. Nurse Cunningham, who comes daily, is waiting for me up in my rooms. Her bag is open, and her rosy cheeks, her bare arms, her needles and her vials, all glisten welcomingly in the firelight. I fight her off as she begins to disrobe me.

"A problem, is there, Professor Brook?" Her breath smells of onions. "Something *else* you want?"

Wheezing, I slump down into one of the leather armchairs beside the fire as she bears my telephone across to me. A new privilege, it lies heavy in my lap as I stab and turn, stab and turn, dialing out a number from the back page of the *Times.* Relays click and electricity pulses in Oxford's new automatic exchange as, somewhere in London, a telephone begins to ring. I gaze at the empty armchair opposite, willing all the smoky ghosts of Oxfords past to give me hope, strength. I try to picture a bustling newsroom filled with the same clean purposeful smell as the papers Allenby brings me. An eager staff reporter, his sleeves rolled up and clasped by a pair of elasticated metal bands, pauses in a conversation and grabs the jangling receiver. And yes, yes, he knows all about the sad mess in the Highlands. He's just back down himself on the overnight sleeper. And a list of names—the Jews who have survived? He has a copy. Not, of course, for public consumption, but seeing as who I am, he'll check it now whilst we're talking…

But today's New Year's Eve, and there are no newspapers tomorrow. The telephone just rings and rings.

Nurse Cunningham performs her duties. She makes notes. She pricks me with fountaining needles. Sometimes, also, there are coils of brown rubber and white medical steel. But, once the needles have gone in, I find it hard to keep track of what she's doing.

"I'll make sure Mr. Allenby looks in at about six so you've plenty of time to get dressed." Her face looms as I'm tucked back into my bed, mummified by blankets. "Oh, and here's the *Evening News*…"

Again, that smell of newsprint. Beneath it, and Nurse Cunningham's clean oniony odour as she leans close, beneath the wood smoke from the

fire and the complex aromas of ancient lives lived amid ancient stone and the reek of disinfectant, the air is faintly, pervasively, soiled.

"Bad news about the Bypass, isn't it, Professor?"

"The what?"

But Nurse Cunningham's already fading, and I'm alone with my room, my body, my bed, my pains, my medications. My good left hand struggles with the paper. For a few moments, I manage to half-lift it as I raise my head from the pillow.

NO TO NEW OXFORD BYPASS
GOVERNMENT CUTS BACK ON ROAD FUNDING

The paper slides from my hands and my head drops back, spinning. I wonder about Ursula Bracken, and if she ever made it safely to America. At moments like this when the entire world seems fluid and bends to my will, I can still nurture mild, pleasant dreams, such as that of receiving a postcard from her—a postcard from some pretty, unspoiled place in empty nowhere where you can ride for days and the mountains will follow you in the distance, and there is no history. It would have been nice to be able to tell her that Oxford will be spared its bypass for another few years after all, although the city centre will doubtless become ever more congested as a result. So there you are, Ursula. Not every effort is in vain.

I smile as the fire crackles and warm tentacles of oblivion entwine me. Then something spasms in my chest and the same empty panic that I feel when I awaken pours through me. My sweat chills. My heart seems to shrivel. Again, the windows are bursting, a car engine is roaring.

Everything disintegrates.

The world already knew that John Arthur was dead by the time I was hauled out from the Cottage Spring. I could hear it in the crowd's sobbing howls as the masonry slid and crumbled, and in the firemen's rough, angry voices.

One of the beer-drinking lads survived for two nights at Barts inside an iron lung. Another remains alive to this day, though a mindless cripple. There were also many deaths and disablements amid the onlookers who'd come to gather in the street outside. Only I, Geoffrey Brook, protected by

that pillar—and, perhaps, in some strange way, by the fact that I was already close to death—truly survived. I suffered a gash along my cheek which required five stitches you can barely see now, a dislocated shoulder and two septic lungfuls of plaster. Of course, I had my bad right hand already, although that fact often feels as lost to me as it is to the rest of the world.

Even as I was carried to the ambulance, the flashbulbs were popping, the television lights were glaring. Three days later, propped up in my hospital bed, smoothed and groomed, sweetly drugged, whispered easy prompts when words failed me, I gave my first press conference. The nation's yearning was so great that I was applauded even by those hardened hacks. For, yes, yes, I knew John Arthur. He was a friend of old. And, although we hadn't kept in direct contact, our lives had touched and remained entwined over the years. When the time came for the Trafalgar Day celebrations, it seemed only right that he should invite me, and we'd driven out to the East End on that night after the parades. I was with him as he watched the fireworks unnoticed by his adoring people, and we talked about our lives, about the strange twists and turns of fate that had taken him to power, and me to Oxford. Then we went for a drink in a pub called the Cottage Spring where we had seen each other briefly many years before…

The press returned when William Arkwright called by at my hospital room several days later. Again, the flashbulbs popped, but this time the new Prime Minister said it all for me. He shook my good left hand and grinned around his pipe, frozen by the crackling white wash. Afterwards, when the doors to the corridors were closed and Arkwright and I were briefly alone, he already seemed bigger than the man I'd met in the gardens of New Buckingham Palace. Power, after so long and patient a wait, had finally settled in his hands. Looking at him, dressed in his black tie, his black suit, the notes for the oration he would give later at John Arthur's State Funeral at Westminster Abbey already tucked into his top pocket, I felt lost and afraid. But Arkwright only smiled and patted my good hand. Then a final thought struck him as he pocketed his unlit pipe and picked up his trademark Homburg hat from the place on my bed where he'd lain it so it would show in the photographs. "And it's Professor Brook from now on," he said. "Did I mention that just now? No matter—it'll be in tomorrow's papers."

John Arthur’s death is already as much a part of his myth as everything that happened during his life. This time, unlike the fire at Old Buckingham Palace, there will even be a trial, although, so slow do the wheels of justice grind in what people are already starting to refer to as post-Modernist Britain, that it won’t take place until the spring. Meanwhile, Jim Toller and several senior officers of the KSG languish in Pentonville Prison. As yet, none of them have committed suicide in their cells.

The national mood is predominantly one of sadness and disillusion, combined with a new sense of realism. With John Arthur gone, the world seems bleaker. EA badges are less frequently worn, and KSG officers are no longer treated with awe; some may even find it hard to get served in shops, or suffer children’s jibes as they walk the streets, implicated as they are by association in the death of their great leader. The British economy, it seems, is far weaker than we ever imagined, damaged by ten years of over-expenditure. Conscription is being phased out in this mood of belt-tightening, and negotiations with France and Germany about mutual disarmament will commence in February. There is even talk—oblique, as yet—of giving India and Ireland a semblance of Home Rule, and of fresh elections for a new People’s Assembly in place of the sham and farce of the old House of Commons.

All the rest, that last glorious summer of hope and expansion when nothing seemed impossible as long as we kept our belief, already feels like a dream. After all, the world is becoming an increasingly dangerous place—Japan has attacked China, Stalin has annexed eastern Poland—and it’s obvious that the countries of the West must draw together if they are not to be swept away by Communism and a commercially belligerent America. John Arthur’s threats towards France and Germany, his canny alliance with Stalin, and the work in the desert wastes of Western Australia, where British scientists have recently set off a “controlled reaction”, have simply given us a top seat at the table in the negotiations to come.

His picture had vanished from the urinals in the Gents beside Christ Church Meadow when I made my recent farewell visit there, leaving just the screwholes and a slightly darker mark on the wall. Gone also, in these straightened times, is the *John Bull*-reading War veteran, although the nail-marks that I and my acquaintance made in the third cubicle have yet to be

covered by fresh paint. Long may they linger. Somehow, as I touched their soft indentations, they spoke to me of nothing but hope and decency.

The Cumbernalds' house shines out amid a Christmassy spray of car headlights. There are lights, too, wound like a roller coaster up the tall firs in the front garden, and flashing on and off around the front porch.

"All terribly kitsch, I know," Cumbernald assures me as I step in from the raw cold whilst my driver hangs back to make sure that I've been passed on to the next safe pair of hands. "But Christmas is for children, isn't it—the child within us all? There's no sense in resisting…"

He takes my coat and passes it to the maid behind him. He's wearing a red velvet jacket, a glossy blue cummerbund, an iridescent bow tie. A stray bit of Christmas sparkle glitters on one of his eyebrows.

"Everyone's waiting for you…"

It would be bad form for these groups clustered beneath the coloured streamers of the long reception room to burst into applause, but nevertheless a palpable change of mood passes through them at my appearance. Within moments, I'm surrounded, touched, smiled at, reminded of previous meetings and promises of lunch, breathed over, stroked, prodded. Grateful for the armour of my tablets and Nurse Cunningham's injections, drawing people behind me like the tail of a comet, I shuffle across the carpets towards the largest, warmest and most inviting looking chair. Secure in the knowledge that I will be guided as I cast myself down, I slump in its general direction.

The pictures on the walls here are pretty scenes of British towns and the British countryside. But for the fact that they lack captions and are probably expensive originals, they're very much like the images you see in every public place and railway station, and that will soon also grace the cover of *Figures Of History*. Chilly blue seas and heathered hills, weathercocked spires and awninged marketplaces, dappled sunlight, dotted clouds, lakes and farmhouses, even the occasional glimpse of a car or a tractor. But there are few people about in this lost dream of Britain, and they are disguised by headscarves, hats and raincoats. Looking at these scenes of an empty, blandly-pretty countryside, I realise just how sick of Britain I have become, and how much I long to be rid of it.

Cumbernald brings me a sweet sherry and a Spode plate with a hard-boiled egg, a leaf of lettuce, a sausage roll; what we English call a salad. The crowd around me thins as it becomes apparent that I'm not responding to their questions. From being a living link to John Arthur, I'm demoted to an old relic, to be touched for luck, then forgotten. Miss Flood will have to hurry if she really expects to capitalise on my fame. Music plays. The fire flickers. The Christmas tree glitters. The Christmas decorations turn and sway. There are many hours to go yet before midnight and the coming of 1941.

Eileen Cumbernald sits for a while on the arm of my chair, brown as ever in a low-backed dress as she chatters on about reassuring things; she is as she is, and demands acceptance on no terms other than the simple facts that she is human, middle-aged, a woman, a mother. Her husband Eric's impending promotion to Vice Chancellor of Oxford University has left her totally unchanged.

"I *so* enjoyed that time we spent together at Penrhos," she tells me, her face redly flushed. "The girls are fond of you and your funny stories. They're staying up tonight…" The pearls of her necklace stick to her chin as she surveys the crowd. "They should be around somewhere. You really *must* come down with us again next year…"

I have to smile. It's funny, how people choose to ignore my obvious physical decline. I suppose that they imagine it's only natural. In fact, for me to appear too hale and hearty after surviving the machine gun attack and explosion that killed John Arthur would probably be seen as suspicious, if not downright blasphemous.

Eileen Cumbernald wanders away to be replaced by P. Wiseman. Magdalene man that he is, even he can't afford to let tonight pass him by now that Cumbernald's Vice Chancellor elect. For all I know, he may even have used his connection with me to wrangle tonight's invitation. I'm grateful as he goes through his usual how-are-you-keeping banter—as if he of all people didn't know—when Christine and Barbara Cumbernald rustle up behind him in their party dresses.

"You're even *more* like dead Uncle Freddie now!" Barbara declares delightedly as she imprisons me in her hot arms. Ribbons are falling from her hair and her face is white apart from a dazzling pink spot on each cheek. She smells of wine and sweat and toffee.

“What did you both get for Christmas?”

Barbara rolls her eyes—*where* to begin?—whilst Christine hangs back a little, looking just as pale and hot as her sister, but more clearly the eldest now, her face and body drifting towards that first rough approximation of womanliness. I really don’t know whether to feel happy or sad for her.

“Tell you what,” Barbara says, wriggling the points of her patent leather shoes. “We’ll *show* you. Come on…”

There are shrieks of fairy laughter, disappearing flecks of grubby cotton underskirt, and I must hurry if I am to follow them, tunnelling out through the sour clinging heat of bodies into wider hallways and turns, past downstairs toilets, unlit billiard rooms, and little alcoves where the coats hang like carcasses and watchful maids with Bellini faces huddle as they puff at their cigarettes. Barbara and Christine scamper ahead into a place where the night empties itself through a hundred arched panes of glass.

“This is Daddy’s new conservatory,” Christine tells me, her breath whispering in clouds, her face within looking more than ever like that of the beautiful woman she will surely become. “He had it built as a part of his Christmas present, although it wasn’t much of a surprise.”

“He doesn’t grow any flowers either because he’s too busy,” Barbara adds, skidding across the tiles, whilst I look around for a wicker chair to absorb the swollen pain and weight of my body. “*These,*” she waves her hand at a pile of wonders, “are our presents.” Under these stars, in this darkness, I can just make out the lifeless faces of dolls, angular bits of board game, what looks like a small but serviceable motor car. “We shoved them in here because we couldn’t think of anywhere else.”

“Don’t you want to play with them?”

They shrug and exchange looks.

“Will you tell us one of your funny stories?”

“You mean about the past?” I ask.

They both nod gravely. But I’m lost here. The starlight barely makes it through the glass to my eyes.

“Why don’t you both tell *me* a story instead?” I suggest. “Tell me what you know about John Arthur.”

“John Arthur,” Barbara intones, “died a hero’s death as we as a Nation celebrated Trafalgar Day. Bad people who wanted to—” But at this point, Christine begins to tickle her. They collapse into a squealing heap.

When they’re almost still again, I do my best to tell them about Saladin and the capture of Jerusalem, but my choice of subject is a poor one and Christine starts to draw matchstick men on the frosted glass whilst Barbara does handstands: they’re plainly not in the mood. After a while, I half-close my eyes, feigning sleep in my wicker chair, and they put their fingers to their lips and creep out, leaving me to my old man’s dreams, these stars, this empty night.

The chair creaks. The snow that covers the Cumbernalds’ wide back garden is barred with the light of many windows. Will they stay in this house on Raglan Street, I wonder, in the wake of Eric’s promotion and the knighthood that will almost certainly follow, or will they move upwards to some semi-stately home? With the billiard room and this conservatory, the hugely expensive kitchen I got a glimpse of, they’ve clearly got things exactly as they want them. But they will move, of course. They’ll continue to swim through these warm currents until age and frailty finally catch up with them. They’ll probably even accept death with good grace—after all, they’ll know that they’ve have had a few good innings. Just like me, they’ll have no cause to complain.

I really am a full Professor now. An MA, Modern History, from my own college, too. As Cumbernald has carefully explained, my Master’s can be seen as either honourary or de-facto depending upon the angle from which you choose to view it. The thing often switches back and forth even in my own befuddled mind—a strange state of existence which I suspect that the scientists Walter Bracken refused to join in Australia would recognise from their studies of the hints and glimmers that apparently make up our universe. We’re barely there, it seems, if you look closely enough; just energies and particles that don’t belong in a particular time or place. Stare at the world too hard, breathe at it from the wrong direction, and it falls apart.

Christlow was found drowned on a muddy bank of the Thames down by the Isle of Dogs the morning after the Cottage Spring. A presumed suicide, there were whispers on the Oxford grapevine of evidence found in his rooms of preferences that should never be entertained by a man who did volunteer work with children.

I don’t doubt, in fact, that he was following me. Where and how it began, and whether he always knew of my sexual dalliances, or whether his suspicions of me were more recent, I will never know. But I’m sure that he found the pistol in the suitcase beneath my bed. No doubt he imagined he was doing no more than his patriotic duty by reporting my movements. But here the picture grows fuzzy, unscientific, unhistoric…

My thoughts always come back to the man who has most plainly benefited from John Arthur’s death. More than ever now, it’s clear that we all underestimated William Arkwright. He’s a consummate survivor, a dealer and a fixer, a betrayer, a maker and an unmaker of men: a *politician* in the sense that John Arthur—who lived, for all his faults, by the gut, by the heart, by the flame and the fire—never was. It must have been plain to Arkwright long before it was to the rest of us that Modernism was in crisis, seduced by its own myth and in danger of launching itself into economic catastrophe and a disastrous European war. So perhaps Arkwright finally persuaded the generals, the old guard—the relics of an establishment that we all presumed had died off but now, resurgent, is so supportive of him—that enough was enough. As even the arrest of Jim Toller and his senior KSG colleagues acknowledges, John Arthur’s death was executed too professionally to be the work of mere fanatics.

From this, I soon find myself taking the kind of wild flights that, even when I was spinning though the most dangerously speculative pages of my long-projected book, I would never have considered undertaking. History—the only kind of history, anyway, that anyone ever cares about—is always reducible to solid facts that can be learnt by students in hour-long lessons and then regurgitated in exams, or used to add colour to television dramas, or as the embroidery in escapist novels. But it seems to me that my own plan to kill John Arthur, of which he himself clearly had no knowledge, was known about, indeed accepted and encouraged from its inception, by senior figures within the Government who already wished him dead. What could have been more convenient than to have some dying madman perform the deed? So my path was cleared, and perhaps even poor Walter Bracken was dispatched in a sham suicide once he had given me what I required of him. I still remained, though, just one of several options. An idea to be toyed with—or at least not discarded until the last appropriate moment. Even as I wandered the gardens of New Buckingham Palace two days before

Trafalgar Day, it was still quite possible that I would be allowed access to John Arthur with my Humane Bullets and my Webley .45 Bulldog Revolver. After all, I had done well enough so far. There was no particular reason why I shouldn't succeed, other than the question mark that hung over my own character. And whom should I meet there amid the terraced fountains, but none other than William Arkwright?

It was then, I think, that I was finally weighed in the balance and found lacking. I was dropped from the contingencies, and Arkwright ordered that I be arrested by his own officials, questioned, then shot whilst more reliable plans were put in hand. Only some chance enquiry from John Arthur's office about my whereabouts—that midnight phone call echoing in that shaft between the buildings—saved my life.

Did John Arthur know that an assassination attempt was likely? Did he welcome it? Did he send that invitation to me half-expecting that I would be the final link in the chain that would break him? And was it I who led both John Arthur and his killers to the Cottage Spring? But no, no. All of this is too fantastic—worse than those dreadful Modernist books that I forced myself to read. Even now, I'm still swept on by the myth of John Arthur.

The fact is that I will never know. Perhaps in years to come when the truth is no longer potent, some hack or scholar will come up with a theory that questions the role of Jim Toller's KSG in John Arthur's death. They may even stumble across the strange fact that another figure, an obscure populist academic named Brook, was arrested in possession of a gun. Odder still, this Brook character was then released and was with John Arthur at the time of his death—survived, even, the explosion. I cannot imagine what threads they will draw out from these odd facts. By their nature, the true conspiracies are the ones that are least likely to be unearthed in the future. The truth, at the end of the day remains forever silent. We are only left with history.

"*There* you are, Brook!" Cumbernald looms out from the lights in the hallway and lays his hand on my shoulder. Everything else subsides. "Can't just drift off like this, you know. There's a phone call for you. A Miss Flood. She sounds pretty excited."

"She's my editor."

“Ah!” He nods as if that explains it all. My knees pop and crack like tiny fireworks as he helps me up. His right arm supports me as he leads me down the corridor. “You can take it in here in my study,” he says, pushing open the door. He hands me the receiver from the top of his desk, then steps back, watching me for a few moments as I settle down on a chair that smells of new leather and swivels alarmingly.

I lift the telephone to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Geoffrey, there you are!” Miss Flood sounds excited, and I can hear merry voices behind her, the pop of a bottle. “I got your number here from that creepy chap who works for you at the college.”

“Christlow?”

“Whatever. I’ve marvellous news, Geoffrey. I really couldn’t wait to share it. The most amazing thing is that it’s come *quite* unsolicited. I mean, I really wouldn’t have the *nerve* to ask…”

I wait as Miss Flood burbles on, studying the ample bookshelves that cover these study walls (mostly do-it-yourselves and who-dunnits, a few biographies and thin histories; a small space where my own work will fit in easily), doing my best to banish the sense of gloomy premonition that still comes over me when people announce they have news. I have, of course, no recent sexual misdemeanours to worry about, but a sense of them is still with me; those ghostly hands and arms and mouths, the sigh and the glisten of flesh in those few moments when hot reality soars; and then afterwards when everything seems far off, encased in glassy guilt, passionless ice…

“…so Arkwright’s own Private Secretary asked if it wasn’t too much of a presumption to ask. I mean, as if we’d really *mind*. It’s perfect, isn’t it, Geoffrey? You’ve *met*—he *knows* you—he’s a link with the future, yet also with John Arthur and the past. It’s everything, Geoffrey, that we were talking about this lunchtime. Of course, we’ll have to re-do the dustjacket to give his name due prominence, but it really does cover just about every imaginable angle…”

“You mean Arkwright is—”

“—Yes, going to write a Foreword to your book! I know, I know. I still haven’t got over it either.”

“Can’t we just say…”

“Say what?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“I haven’t even started to *think* what this’ll do to the print runs! Of course, it means that you, Geoffrey, can relax. You won’t have to write a *thing* more…”

Part of me drops away as I gaze down at the receiver. There are two ways, I decide, to gain a person’s silence and compliance. You either take away their lives and scrub out their identity. Or you give them everything.

“So that’s it, then?”

“That’s right, Geoffrey. I hope you’re not too upset about losing that new article. But we couldn’t possibly squeeze it in now if we’re to keep to the same pagination…”

“Right.”

“Marvellous! And Happy New Year.”

“You, too, Miss Flood.” I begin to put down the phone.

“Oh, Geoffrey…” Her voice is a buzzing lisp. “…not that it matters now as far as the book’s concerned, but I do have a number, a contact for that research you were talking about. Someone in the Government who’s co-ordinating the Jewish relief effort.”

“Yes?” I cradle the phone between my shoulder and chin, searching the leather and ash expanse of Eric Cumbernald’s desktop for something resembling a pen or a pencil, a scrap of paper. There are brass-framed family photographs. A gold-plated Modernist circle and cross paperweight. A few seashell boxes. Some kind of golfing trophy. I slide open the drawers until I find a note pad and begin to scrawl out the number and the name that Miss Flood dictates to me, left handed.

Then I put down the phone without wishing her goodbye.

“Everything okay in there?” Cumbernald asks. His eyes travel down to my bit of paper. “If you want to make another call, no matter where, you—”

“—It’s alright. I don’t think I’ll bother.”

“In that case,” Cumbernald says, sliding back a cabinet front to reveal a television screen surrounded by a complicated nest of equipment, “there’s something I’d very much like to show you. I think we’ve just time before midnight…”

Cumbernald twists dials and turns switches. As the comforting smell of warming valves slowly fills the room, I tear the top sheet of the note pad into tiny bits. The name Miss Flood’s given me of the Home Office official

who's overseeing of the operation to give food, medical treatment and shelter to the Jews is Hugh Reeve-Ellis.

The television screen snows. Then there are ghostly figures that make me think of my acquaintance and his family, huddled in their crude huts or blanketed in the hurricane wilderness on this and other wintry nights. Of course, the Government has come to their rescue now. The terrible situation has been proclaimed by Ministry of Information Press Release, and the newspapers have lapped it up unquestioningly. Soon, it will be dealt with, and—a little sadder, a little wiser, a little less trustful—we Britons will watch the results on the Nine O-Clock News and in the cinemas on Pathé, knowing that the camera cannot lie. This Jewish Scandal has come at just the right time. It shows Arkwright as a man of honesty who is prepared to deal with the aberrations that so blackened Modernism's reputation in the rest of the world. It may even get us back into the League of Nations. In a few months—or years, perhaps—a similarly narrow spotlight will fall upon the treatment camps in the Isle of Man. But, even if my acquaintance and his family have survived, angel of death that I am, I realise I will never try to contact them.

Cumbernald produces a large black disk and places it on the spinning turntable of what appears to be a giant record player. "I had the cine-recording transcribed onto vinyl," he explains as the television screen sparks and crackles and the needle wobbles up and down. "Of course, it's not *cheap* at the moment, but, take my word for it, it's the future of home entertainment…"

I watch the jumpy white outlines of Eileen, Christine, Barbara and myself as we sit outside the summer lodge in Penrhos Park. Eileen and I raise a glass and smile for the camera whilst the children bound and leap, then becoming swirling blurs, as if their life and energy is too much for any kind of technology to contain. Behind it all is a crackle and a rumble. *Eggs and bacon, Eggs and bacon. Apple and custard.…*

"Been thinking, by the way," Cumberland says, leaning against a bookshelf as he admires his handiwork. "About who should replace me as principal at college. We need someone with *reputation*, don't you think? Someone with a sound background. All the right connections. *Weight.* An agile mind… The post is, in honesty, a tough but rewarding one. And I

don’t really think you’ll be surprised, Brook, when I tell you that your name was the first that came to mind.”

“I’m far too old,” I mutter, still gazing at the screen as Christine and Barbara run up to me, their tongues stuck out like gorgeous gargoyles, their whole futures ahead of them. “Far too ill…”

“Such a pity,” Cumberland says, re-folding his arms, adding just the right note of regret, “even if it were true…” But he doesn’t push it. In fact, he sounds relieved.

“Anyway,” he stoops down, preparing to lift the needle from the record as the matchstick figures dance and shift, grey on white. I can’t remember whether he brought his cine camera with him when we went into the Sun Area, but it’s impossible to tell now whether the figures on the screen are clothed or naked, young or old, starving or affluent. “Time we got back into the throng, old man,” he says as they dissolve into a flash of light, then shrink down through a pin dot into the blackness. At the end of the day, we’re all the same. “It’s nearly midnight.”

The lights are off now in the reception room, and the Christmas tree sparkles and flashes. People’s hands brush and linger as they part to let me through to another big television screen, still trying to absorb what little remains of my talismanic sparkle. What a year, after all, it has been.

The television shows the face of Big Ben as its minute hand climbs through the last moments of 1940. With what seems like a final reluctant shudder, it shakes the year off and the bells begin their famous chime. *Bong*—and there it is. *Bong*—a New Year is beginning. Lips and hands press damp against my own with the rustle of tweed and rayon, the dig of jewellery, wafts of perfume and sweat. The maids are already waiting with fluted glasses of sparkling Sussex wine, but first we must join hands and sing that song by Burns, a ritual from which even my fame and obvious frailty does not excuse me.

Afterwards, I sip the sweet fizzy alcohol and think of escape—of getting back to my tablets, my rooms—when the doorbell sounds along the hallway. I’m already on my way towards it in the hope that it’s my driver when I realise that eager hands are assisting me, eager voices are urging me on. The doorbell sounds again. It’s clearly some neighbour out first-footing with a piece of shortbread, a lump of coal to lay upon the fire. And who better than I, Geoffrey Brook, to greet them? This, after all, is 1941. Winter

will soon be ending, and spring and summer beckon. The days will be sweet and long again as the sun blazes down; dark, bright and joyous even as memory swarms over them like the rush of the tide.

The Cumbernalds' large front door swings inwards. I'm expecting a figure, some shape or form, perhaps even the dark handsome stranger of tradition, to be standing on the doorstep. But the doorway remains empty, and I, pushed on, seem to travel out and through; on into the blackness and the terrible, empty, cold.

20

I'VE BEEN READING—OR re-reading, I'm really not sure now—that stained copy that I inherited from John Arthur—from Francis—of William Morris's News From Nowhere. The curled, brittle pages, smelling of damp, smelling of age, gritty with sand, dried mud and the dusty air of nearly half a century, as weary and old as the suitcase in which I kept them, speak of nothing that truly resembles the vision of Greater Britain that came to pass. Morris hated big industry, he hated all big things, he hated terror, he hated injustice. How, then, was he pulled so deeply into the currents of Modernism that Blackwells are even now trying to get rid of discounted piles of copies of The Well At The World's End, The Sundering Flood, The Waters Of The Wondrous Isles? All that Morris and Modernism ever shared was a preparedness to dream, and a love of a bright, clean, glorious past that never was. But perhaps that was enough; perhaps the dream, any dream, is always the seed from which nightmares will follow.

John Arthur himself is fading in the new grey daylight of this different world. His memory seems to have no life, is twisted and pulled to suit whatever meaning people choose to give it as easily as were Morris's unread pages. It's almost as if I'm the only person left in this nation who grieves for him, or who still wishes to understand. That fatal night when we were together follows me even now, a dark figure filled with reproach and love and anger tugging at my shoulder, breathing chill upon my neck. All the questions I should have asked, the challenges I should have made. Either I loved, I suppose, the incarnation of something evil, or John Arthur was a puppet like me, jerked and changed through the years that separated us by the whims of some incomprehensible greater will. Between these two horrors, I keep trying to find some middle way, a decent path that anyone might wander along in their lives and find themselves unexpectedly and irrevocably lost. Francis was no monster, for all that I know that he used me much more than he loved me in the brief time that we were truly together. For all his faults, he railed against injustice, prejudice, stupidity, and would have been horrified to learn that people could be stripped of their lives for the sake of some accident of birth.

So I keep thinking instead of Mrs. Stevens, my acquaintance's neighbour, who offered me tea and the unquestioning warmth of her kitchen, and of Cumbernald, and of the woman behind the counter in the Post Office, and that Bus Inspector on the road to Adderly, and the many nurses and policemen, and, yes, of Christlow, and even Reeve-Ellis, and the faces you see looking out from train windows, and the children you see playing in the street. And my own face in the mirror is there, too, although haggard as death now, the stranger-corpse that will soon be all that is left of me. Francis belongs there, with us all. He didn't close the cell doors himself, he didn't pull the ropes, touch the wires, kick shut the filing cabinet drawers, or even sign the forms that authorised the contracts that emptied so many lives from history. We did that for him.

We all are innocent.

We are all guilty.

During the few days before Francis and I headed south again at what turned out to be the end of our Scottish holiday, we lived together, totally alone, in a ramshackle stone cottage. The place had a rough slate floor like something carried in by the tide, thick walls with tiny windows that overlooked the beach and the impossibly smooth silver sand that faded without change into the flat glittering surface of the sea. The panes were clouded and cracked, holed and stuffed with old newspapers; curtained with cobwebs, too, when the old woman from the farmhouse up by the point came to let us in. In storms, in winter, the thin turf roof would have leaked the sea and the wind and the rain. But the weather was like honey when we were there. The sea was like wine. The rocks were marble. Alone, miles from the world once the old woman had gone, we swam naked and caught translucent shrimps from the pools beyond the dunes and lay on our backs on the sands and gazed into a sky that was as clear as gin, as deep as the sea. And we boiled the shrimps to pink in a witch's iron pot on a driftwood fire each evening. We ate them with our fingers.

Time stopped. The Earth stood still on its axis. The whole universe turned around us. Francis's skin was browned and bleached to lacy tidemarks by the sea and the sun, and he tasted like the shrimps; briny salt and sweet. The aurora borealis filled the sky at midnight, all the colours of light raining down from veils that moved with a soft hissing.

Lying one night tangled amid the blankets of our rough cot, my skin stiff from the sun and the soles of my feet gritty, some twist of emptiness made me reach out and open my eyes. Francis had gone from beside me, and was standing naked at the open cottage doorway, his hand on the frame, looking out at the pale sea, the white sand, the star-shot night.

"You see over there…?" he said, sensing from the change in my breathing that I was awake. "Right over there, Griff, towards the horizon…?"

I propped myself up, following his gaze out along the white shingle path, the low wall, the pale dunes that edged into the luminous ripple of the waves. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps there was something out there, the shining grey backs of a shoal of islands that daylight made the air too brilliant to see.

"I think we should go there, Griff," he said, his shoulders and limbs rimmed with starlight. "Remember? That lovely name…?"

"There won't be anything to see," I said, lying back in the blankets, feeling the pull of sleep. "And there'll be no way of getting across. No ferry…"

But I could see those islands more clearly now as I closed my eyes and the darkness began to take me. Heathered hills rolling down to dark green copses of pine. Sheep-dotted lowlands. The summer-sparkling rim of the sea. I could even smell a uniquely milky scent of summer grass and flowers carried to me on the soft breeze from off the Atlantic. Yes, I thought, we will go there.

But the weather had changed in the morning when we awoke. Low grey clouds lay across the dunes and met with the sea. Dampness beaded the cottage walls, silvering our bedding and filling the air like smoke as we shivered over breakfast and checked our map and decided to head south again, towards, perhaps, the Gulf of Corryvreckan—yet another of Francis's magical names.

So we never did get to visit the Summer Isles. Francis pushed quickly down the track as we left our cottage beneath a sky that threatened nothing but rain, cycling as fast as he always cycled, forever heading on. I even feared that I, teetering with my older legs as I bumped along with my heavy suitcase strapped behind me, would never catch up with him. It was then, I think, as he crested the top of the first hill and vanished from sight,

freewheeling eagerly down towards the farm on the headland where we would hand in the keys, that I finally lost my Francis. It was then that he was swallowed by history, and that everything else that was to happen began.

21

WELL-ANCHORED IN MY wheelchair on this steamship's juddering deck, scarfed and gloved and wrapped and alone, I gaze at those famous white cliffs, as grey on this late January morning as is the sea, the sky, these circling gulls. The air is bitter and cold, filled with the groan of engines and the smoke and salt they churn in their wake. There will be no last glimpse of England—I realise that now—just this gradual fading.

Like so many other things I have done in my life, my departure has proven surprisingly easy. I could detect no resistance as my driver ferried me about Oxford and I withdrew my funds and made my travel arrangements. In any event, the number of stamps and passes required to leave this country are greatly reduced. There have been no footsteps behind me, and the glances at my tickets and papers as I took the train for the last time down to London, changed at Kings Cross, then travelled on to the docks at Dover, have all been perfunctory. I do not think I have seen a single member of the diminished KSG, or even of the local Constabulary. No voices called me back as I was carried up the gangplank to this ship, the *SS Tynwald*, bound for Calais.

The voices that I have heard from the crew, the stewards, the other passengers, are French, Spanish, Dutch, German, American. Here, as we plough across the narrow stretch of water that separates the rest of the world from England, we are all foreigners. Back in Oxford, I suppose, Allenby will have found my note by now, and passed it on to Cumbernald as he tidies his desk and prepares to leave the college. My letter, posted to London the day before, will probably also be waiting in a pigeonhole for Miss Flood. Of course, there will be concern about my semi-mysterious disappearance, but that will soon be followed by weary, head-shaking amusement at the thought that I still had this one last act in me.

Thus I travel, ill, wealthy and alone. My precise plans, as the maps and the possibilities widen in my mind, remain vague. Long journeys hold no fears for me now: if you are rich enough, there are always people who will give you what you require. All I know is that I want to end my days somewhere far from England, where the climate is dry and warm, where

there are lizards on the walls and the stars are different. From Calais, I shall continue east and south for as far as this body will take me. First Class, and by train. Preferably by sleeper.

About the Author

Ian R. MacLeod is the acclaimed writer of challenging and innovative speculative and fantastic fiction. His most recent novel, *Wake Up and Dream*, won the Sidewise Award for Alternate History, while his previous works have won the Arthur C. Clarke Award, the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, and the World Fantasy Award, and have been translated into many languages. His short story, “Snodgrass,” was developed for television in the United Kingdom as part of the Sky Arts series *Playhouse Presents*. MacLeod grew up in the West Midlands region of England, studied law, and spent time working and dreaming in the civil service before moving on to teaching and house-husbandry. He lives with his wife in the riverside town of Bewdley.

Gillian Bowskill

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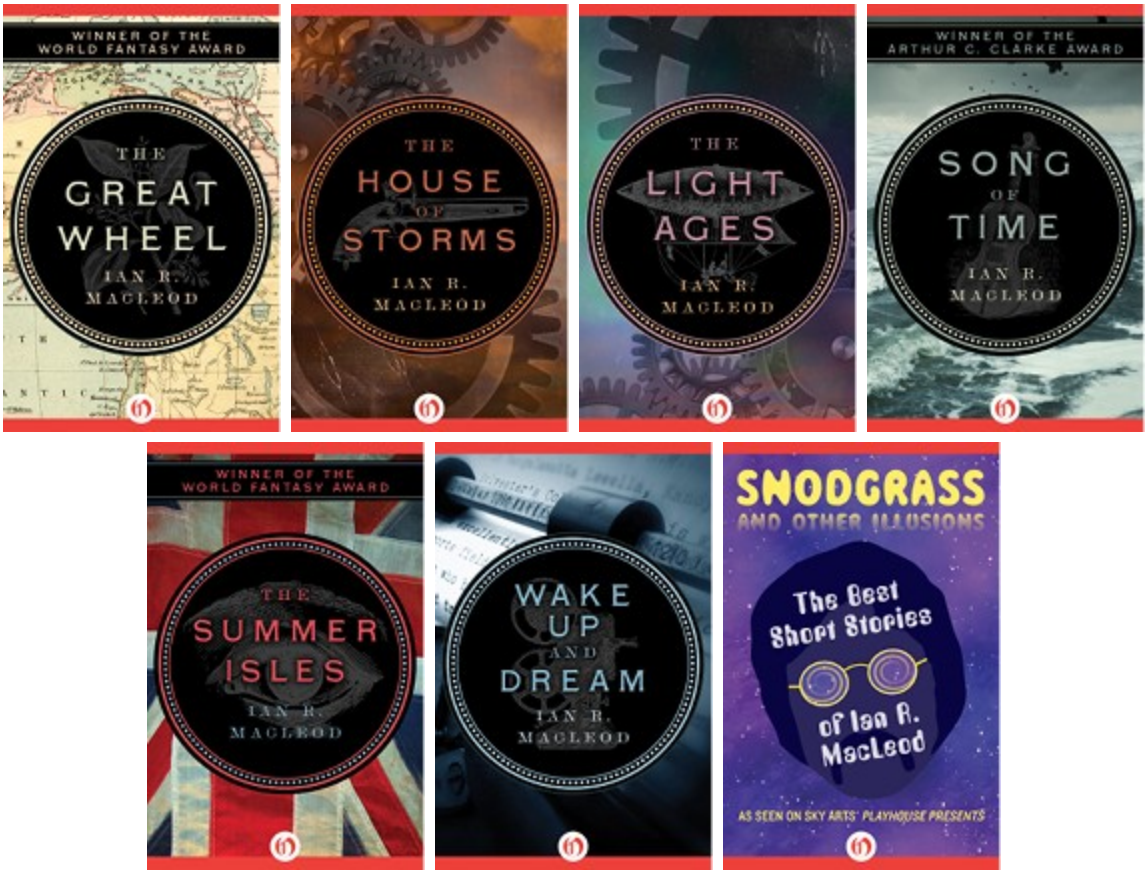

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